



Maryland Native Plant Society

APPRECIATION CONSERVATION EDUCATION

Testimony: SB667, Natural Resources – Edible Forests and Foraging Program – Establishment

Committee: Education, Energy, and the Environment

Hearing Date: February 17, 2026

Position: FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Maryland Native Plant Society (MNPS) supports SB667 with amendments. The creation of edible forests has the potential to educate the public about the benefits of plants native to our state, while providing food that uses resources efficiently. Promotion of the preservation of Maryland's native plants and their habitats is critical to the MNPS mission.

Edible forests are planted, sustainable, regenerative landscapes that enable the public to collect healthy foods. Several edible forests have been created in Maryland including at White Marsh Park in Queen Anne's County, at Todd Park in Harford County, and at the City of Brunswick Food Bank in Frederick County.

In these food landscapes, people become more aware of the benefits and beauty of native plants. Consequently, visitors might decide to plant natives on their own properties and even become advocates for the protection of native habitats. Additionally, edible forests produce food with a fraction of the resources and maintenance used in conventional farming, allowing nature to do the heavy lifting. Edible forests generally do not require supplemental watering, pesticides, or fertilizers to produce food because the healthy plant infrastructure is sufficient to nurture their growth.¹

We propose two amendments to achieve the full benefits of this edible landscaping to the public and to our environment. First, plants chosen for edible landscaping should be native to Maryland. Our state has many tree and shrub species that produce fruits and nuts, some familiar like paw paws and others that could garner a new following, like American hazelnuts. To ensure that all plants in edible forests are native to Maryland, they should be selected from the over 675 native plants listed on the Commercial Maryland Native Plant List.² Using native plants on state lands would create habitat for the declining populations of our insects, songbirds, and other wildlife, whereas non-natives do not have the same ecological benefits.

Second, edible forest locations should be restricted to currently or previously disturbed state lands, especially in urban and suburban areas, such as turf areas in parks, old agriculture fields, and

The Maryland Native Plant Society promotes awareness, appreciation, and conservation of Maryland's native plants and their habitats. Our engaged, active members represent all 24 state jurisdictions, from the coastal plain beaches to the western mountains. We reach 20,000 followers on social media. MNPS is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization incorporated in Maryland.

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developed lands that have recently been abandoned. State-owned natural habitats, which are so critical for the survival of our native plants and animals, should not be converted to edible forests.

Everyone visiting Maryland's natural areas is asked to follow "Leave No Trace" principles to "minimize their impact while maximizing their experience."³ Visitors are asked to "stick to trails" and "leave what you find." As a result, we see many challenges and obstacles to establishing a permitted foraging program in natural areas.

Foraging in natural areas endangers both the environment and the foragers. When visitors leave designated trails, adults and children incur risk through exposure to uneven terrain which could result in falls, and to poison ivy, insect stings, and snake bites. The natural habitat can be damaged because foragers compact soil, trample plants, and disturb nesting animals. Plants, especially mushrooms, can be difficult to identify; so, foragers risk poisoning themselves, even when they have received training. Most critically, how will the Maryland Department of Resources prevent over-harvesting in our state parks and forests by foragers?

MNPS proposes several amendments that would install carefully considered guardrails while still allowing foraging on State-owned land. These requirements would clearly outline what native and invasive species could be harvested during which times of year and weather conditions, and in which clearly demarcated areas. By specifying target species, the risk of mistaking poisonous species for food would be reduced, along with the possibility of harvesting rare, threatened, and endangered plants. Further, roots, tubers, and other underground parts should never be collected because populations of the target species could be decimated, plus digging would cause considerable disturbance that would endanger the health of the forest floor.

Based on the discussion and amendments above, we believe that edible forests are beneficial and with a few requirements should be implemented. In contrast, foraging is riskier for the environment and visitors and so would require more significant protections for natural areas.

The Maryland Native Plant Society urges a favorable with amendments report on SB667.

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¹ Maryland Forestry Foundation. Accessed 2/1/26. Have you ever Heard of a Food Forest?

<https://www.marylandforestryfoundation.org/have-you-ever-heard-of-a-food-forest/>

² University of Maryland Extension. Accessed 2/1/26. Commercial Maryland Native Plants List.

<https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environment-natural-resources/program-areas/maryland-native-plants-program/search-tool-plant-guides/>

³ Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Accessed 2/1/26. Leaving No Trace.

<https://dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/pages/lnt.aspx>