

NATIVE PLANT GARDENING

An Introduction To The Benefits Of Landscaping With Nature



People come to native plant gardening along different paths: a concern for the environment, a passion for gardening, an intellectual or aesthetic curiosity about the way things were, or perhaps simply a desire to connect with the natural world.

Whether you experiment with just a few native plants in your garden or try to create an entire habitat, the diversity of native plants offers beauty and interest for every garden. There are native plants to suit any garden's conditions whether the site is sunny, shady, dry, wet, hot, cold, windy or sheltered.

Native plant gardens offer a low-maintenance and attractive alternative to lawns. Rather than spending your time mowing and trimming your grass, you can spend your gardening hours enjoying the natural beauty.

A native plant is one that existed in a particular region prior to European settlement. Not all plants that grow in the wild are native; some, such as Queen Anne's lace and dandelion, are non-native and were introduced to North America by the European settlers.

To determine whether or not a plant is native to your region you will need to do some investigation. A field guide to wildflowers, such as the Peterson series, is a

WHY GARDEN WITH NATIVE PLANTS

- Increases biodiversity
- Attracts wildlife such as butterflies and birds
- Reduces water use in the garden
- Eliminates the need for synthetic fertilizers and pesticides
- Offers a low-maintenance alternative to lawns
- Celebrates local and regional identity
- Works in partnership with nature
- Teaches us about natural processes
- Connects us with natural and aboriginal history

TIPS

FOR GETTING STARTED

- An easy way to get rid of grass, without digging, is to “solarize” the lawn. Simply cover the grass with a sheet of plastic (black plastic will work faster but clear is fine) and leave it to “bake” for six to eight weeks. Lift off the plastic and plant seedlings directly in the soil; don’t worry about removing the dead grass as it will eventually decompose and return its nutrients to the soil.
- Another option is to cover the lawn with newspapers (ten sheets thick) and then cover the newspapers with approximately eight cm of soil. Leave it to decompose for a few weeks, then plant directly in the soil.
- Woodland plants require nutrient-rich soil, full of organic matter. Dig in plenty of compost or well-rotted manure and mulch woodland plants with shredded dead leaves every fall.
- Meadow and prairie plants will do fine in average soil conditions, so other than removing all weeds, you don’t need to amend the soil. However, if your soil is extremely sandy or clayey, add compost to the meadow or prairie bed prior to planting.

good place to start. A local naturalist group, the provincial ministry of natural resources, and the North American native Plant Society are other excellent sources of information. Another good way to learn about native plants is to explore natural areas in your region.

Attracting wildlife to your garden is easier and more successful with native plants because the native birds, insects and mammals have co-evolved with these plants, looking to them for food and shelter. With the addition of native plants, your own garden can become a welcome habitat.

As with any gardening project, the first few years of growing native plants will require some work. You will need to prepare the planting bed (digging up unwanted vegetation such as weeds), amend the soil if it has been disturbed, and plant the species of your choice. It is very important to select species that are adapted to your garden’s conditions. For the first growing season, you will need to water the plants and remove weeds. Once established, however, native plant gardens are low maintenance,

requiring relatively little care.

Native plants often propagate themselves by seed or vegetatively, so you won’t need to purchase new bedding plants annually. Native plants are adapted to local conditions; hence, they do not require synthetic fertilizers or pesticides (which include herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, etc.). However, applying leaf mulch and compost every fall in the woodland garden (though not in the prairie or meadow garden) is an excellent way of promoting healthy native plants.

By planting native species in your garden, you are part of an important movement to preserve the genetic stock of plants and increase biodiversity. This will help to reverse the enormous loss of native vegetation in North America, so that future generations will be able to enjoy and appreciate a more natural environment. Native plant communities also provide food and shelter for insect, bird and animal species, thus helping to preserve and protect wildlife. ❀

RECOMMENDED READING

A Field Guide to Wildflowers of Northeastern and Northcentral North America Roger Tory Peterson and M. McKenny. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

Grow Wild! Native Plant Gardening in Canada and Northern United States Lorraine Johnson. Toronto: Random House, 1998.

Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers Harry R. Phillips. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Natural Landscaping: Designing with Native Plant Communities John Diekelmann and Robert Schuster. New York: McGraw Hill, 1982.

100 Easy-to-Grow Native Plants for Canadian Gardens Lorraine Johnson. Toronto: Random House, 1999.

The Ontario Naturalized Garden: The Complete Guide to Using Native Plants Lorraine Johnson. Vancouver: Whitecap, 1995.

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