

THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



NATIVE PLANTS AT HOME

As we look forward to spring, many of us are planning our landscape updates, being tempted by all the seeds packets showing up in the stores, spending hours looking through newly arrived plant catalogues and waiting (not so patiently) for the growing season. As the excitement builds, let's look at a group of plants that has received quite a bit of attention in recent years but still feels like an unknown to many of us...natives.

"Butterflies used to reproduce on the native plants that grew in our yards before the plants were bulldozed and replaced with lawn. To have butterflies in our future, we need to replace those lost host plants, no if's, and's or but's. If we do not, butterfly populations will continue to decline with every new house that is built."

— Dr. Douglas Tallamy

NATIVE DEFINED...SORT OF

The term 'native' is used to refer to the origin of a species' evolution. When applied to plants in North America, this generally means plant species inhabiting an area prior to European settlement. Plants that have their literal ancestral roots in an area are, generally, better adapted to tolerate the local climate conditions including annual precipitation patterns, seasonal climate variations, soil characteristic and co-exist with local fauna and flora.

THE NATIVE ADVANTAGE

These characteristics provide an advantage to the Outsider incorporating native plants in the landscape. The expansive root system characteristic of native grasses and flowers produce plants better able to withstand periods of drought without requiring supplemental water. Genetic diversity that is found in open pollinated native plants and seed sources often prove advantageous when faced with variable and changing climate patterns. Finally, the co-evolution of native plants and local animal populations mean native grasses and flowers provide food and habitat to a wide variety of wildlife including beneficial insects.



Amid all these benefits, perhaps the most fun, is the fact that there are so many to choose from that there is certainly one for every landscape. From the largest trees to the smallest flower, native plants offer a wide array of characteristics, provide a variety of ecological services, and guarantee there is something for everyone and every landscape. With native plants, there is no reason for any two landscapes to ever look the same again.

HOW TO PROCEED

With all this variety, it can be a bit overwhelming and there are a few things to consider before bringing home native plants. Native plants are wonderful additions to a landscape but sweeping change can be challenging so start small. Even a few native plant species in a landscape of non-natives will provide valuable habitat while building grower confidence.

Second, learn about the seed source and purchase from reputable native plant nurseries. Nurseries that specialize in native plants will offer greater genetic diversity in their plants, helping to preserve 'wild' plants. Use of the term 'native' is not regulated and plants can be found incorrectly labeled. This can be frustrating for well-intentioned Outsiders. It is recommended that Outsiders do research prior to shopping to avoid purchasing a mislabeled plant. Many resources are available to help including the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Native Plant Society, Illinois Wildflowers, and University of Illinois Extension.

Finally, remember that every effort to incorporate native plants into the landscape, large or small, help the local ecosystem. Ecosystem fragmentation has occurred as communities have been built and landscapes have been filled with non-native plants. This creates a survival challenge for many of our native animals. Beneficial insects and the larger species that depend on insects all benefit from the resource connections that can be made when native plants are planted back into the landscape.



Allium cernuum



Eryngium yuccifolium



Asclepias tuberosa



Tradescantia ohiensis



Hypericum prolificum



Bouteloua curtipendula



Liatris pycnostachya



Baptisia alba

In some Native languages the term for plants translates to "those who take care of us." — Robin Wall Kimmerer



WHAT TO PLANT?

Not all native plants belong or behave in a cultivated landscape. Native plants evolved with high amounts of competition and many have developed strategies to out compete neighboring plants. In a well-maintained landscape, these plants can grow wild. Below is a start list of well-behaved plants for the home landscape. These are some of our favorites, but it is, by no stretch, an all-inclusive list. There are many great resources available, many include planting plans for garden design.



SHADE/PART SUN OPTIONS

- Northern Blue Flag Iris (*Iris versicolor*)
- Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)
- Great Blue Lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*)
- Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)
- Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
- Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
- Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*)
- Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)



FULL SUN OPTIONS

- Prairie Blazing Star (*Liatris pycnostachya*)
- Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)
- Shrubby St. John's Wort (*Hypericum prolificum*)
- Ohio Spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*)
- Rattlesnake Master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*)
- Nodding Onion (*Allium cernuum*)
- Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Wild White Indigo (*Baptisia alba*)
- Side Oats Grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*)
- New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*)

"Native plants give us a sense of where we are in this great land of ours. I want Texas to look like Texas and Vermont to look like Vermont."

— Lady Bird Johnson

OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider

- Plan to incorporate a few native plants into your landscape, like spring ephemeral flowers. Explore them [@go.illinois.edu/EarlySpringEphemerals](https://go.illinois.edu/EarlySpringEphemerals)
- Learn about tallgrass prairies at IL Extension's April 12 Introduction to Prairie Plants webinar. Sign up [@go.illinois.edu/PrairiePlants101](https://go.illinois.edu/PrairiePlants101)

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