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Going Native in Your Garden

Digging into the Magic and Myths

by Darrin Duling

 Gardeners are increasingly discovering the pleasure of growing native plants and wildflowers (hereafter referred to as “natives”). We welcome natives into our gardens for their beauty, diversity and ability to attract and support local fauna. We also plant them to help us recapture the memory and essence of that lost woodland, seashore or meadow that once teemed with life and is now a sterile building site.

Gardening with natives is a horticultural trend that is surging in popularity, not in small part due to its strong ties with ecological and conservation issues. As with many rapidly burgeoning trends with wide appeal the translation of information sometimes becomes blurred and exaggerated, causing confusion, which doesn't help the native plant movement. Speaking as a professional botanist and horticulturist, here some thoughts on this issue:

Myth #1: We should only plant natives in our gardens from now on—no more exotics.

Most gardeners don't like to be told what to plant, and many of our traditional favorites from other lands such as peonies, roses, flowering cherries, lilacs, hellebores, daffodils and tulips, not

to mention the majority of our cultivated food crops, are non-invasive and play well as garden companions to our natives. Native plant societies across the country recognize and award gardens for being “native” or “native-friendly” even if they only contain a maximum of 50% native specimens with no invasive exotics present. This middle-path approach encourages people to explore native gardening without laying on heavy constraints that could deter them from this pursuit. Why, then, are some people so adamant about excluding all exotic plants from our gardens? We need to look no further than our own neighborhoods: winged eunymus, Norway maple, oriental bittersweet, Russian olive, hydrilla, kudzu, popcorn tree, Japanese barberry, melaleuca, tamarix and pampas grass, to name but a few, were once considered to be beautiful and benign garden subjects but are now agents of environmental devastation in many regions. Keep these examples in mind if you notice that the new gorgeous thing from another part of the world that you've recently planted starts to show signs of seeding itself prolifically outside of your planted area—there is a good chance that it could escape into



Painted Trillium *Trillium undulatum*

the surrounding landscape and ultimately wreak havoc. As a conscientious lover of gardening and nature, it is your duty to remove it, destroy it and warn others about planting it. Don't let sentiment get in the way of doing the right thing—remember our Mother's old saying: "Pretty is as pretty does!"



Photographs: Darrin Duling

Thimbleberry *Rubus odoratus*

Myth #2: Native plants need no special soil preparation, watering or feeding to thrive.

Unfortunately, many novice gardeners and people who are planting natives for the first time heed this advice and are soured when their newly-planted specimens languish or die soon afterward. Yes, plants in their natural habitat do grow perfectly well without human intervention, but what holds true in nature does not hold true in the artificially-created environment of our gardens. Consider that plants found growing in sun-baked rocky crevices, in remote woodland, in sand dunes, or in wind-swept fields are each likely the only surviving progeny out of thousands of seeds that may have originally been dispersed. That sort of mortality rate is not acceptable or sustainable for gardeners. Native or not, virtually any newly-planted specimen needs some sort of attention and aftercare in order for it to become successfully established. Thoughtful placement, coupled with an establishment period of a few seasons (or a few years for trickier things), will give natives predisposed to your local climate the ability to grow well without coddling. One more thought: gardens are places that we build and maintain in order to improve upon conditions found in nature,

and quite often natives grow bigger and better under our care than they do out in the wild—isn't it our goal to see plants reach their greatest potential?

Myth #3: Native plants should never be trained and only be allowed to grow as they do in nature.

There is a school of thought that decrees natives can't or shouldn't be "tamed" by horticulture. Not surprisingly, native-based gardens managed under this ideology can tend toward a rather rangy look, which is not always appropriate to those who want to maintain a more traditional, manicured landscape. Let's remember that all garden plants started out as wildlings before being brought into cultivation and subjected to horticultural training techniques such as pruning, espalier, coppicing, pollarding, pleaching and containerization. While hedges, clipped specimens and parterres may not readily spring to mind when considering natives for your landscape, the only thing ridiculous about natives being trained this way is that it hasn't been more widely-practiced. Despite their formal appearance, they will still serve as sustainable food and shelter destinations for wild native fauna whereas most familiar exotics used in these ways will not.

Myth #4: We should only plant natives that are sourced from our immediate area. Cultivated varieties of natives are not desirable.

If you are undertaking a scientifically-guided habitat restoration then it is, indeed, essential to use plant material that holds as much genetic integrity matching the originally occurring flora as possible. However, this botanical integrity may not be desired or even possible to replicate in the average garden. To start with, there are native species that have disappeared completely from certain regions and/or have not been commercially cultivated. On rare occasions wild-source plants may be available through rescue missions organized by a professional organization that has permission to collect plants from property slated for development, but remember that the survivability rate of these specimens vs. nursery-grown is usually much lower. An additional note: when buying commercially, don't support the decimation of native flora via illegal collecting—buy only from nurseries that guarantee their plants are nursery propagated.

Cultivars (not hybrids, which are something else altogether) are selected by keen-eyed horticulturists for characteristics that may make them more garden-worthy and appealing than the straight species, e.g.: flower and fruit size and color, leaf shape, size and color, stature and disease-resistance. These special selections help to promote awareness of natives and get them into wider cultivation. It has yet to be determined if cultivars offer the same biological value to native fauna as do their regular brethren, but for now it could be argued that a cultivar of a native plant growing in a garden is more desirable than not growing a native at all.

In closing, horticulture is a field in which there have been, and always will be, wildly divergent opinions on how, and why, to grow things, but the best general rule of thumb that all agree upon is: "Right plant, right place." This applies doubly so to growing natives—by choosing to grow members of your regional flora, while paying attention to

how they grow in the wild, you have great chances for success. Your efforts in this endeavor will be rewarded with a beautiful garden that is a magnet for birds, butterflies and other fascinating wildlife—a home and habitat for all.

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