

Getting Started in Native Plant Gardening

Before You Begin

Survey your garden to determine the environmental conditions (soil type, moisture, sun and shade, elevation) in your garden. This is particularly important when planting native species because many have specific requirements. Map existing structures as well as any features that you plan to add in the near future. (Learn more from the leaflet *Surveying Your Garden*). Such preparation makes for successful gardening.

What and How to Plant

Look to Natural Plant Communities

Plants growing together -- sharing similar ecological requirements -- are called a community. Local natural areas can provide a context for your native plant garden. Replicating these communities exactly may not be possible, but try to emulate their conditions as much as possible for a healthier, more naturalistic garden.

Look Beyond Flowers

Ferns, sedges, grasses, vines, trees and shrubs are often neglected in native plant gardens, yet they are part of the overall plant community. For example, trees and shrubs not only contribute height, texture and wildlife habitat, they also serve as a windbreak, offering protection for other plants. Native vines include both annuals and perennials. They can be used as groundcovers or allowed to twine over shrubs and trees for excellent wildlife habitat.

Develop Layers

Varying the height of plants is called layering. In nature, layers consist of canopy, understory and herbaceous cover. Layering more typically reflects woodland habitats where trees, shrubs and ferns, flowers and groundcovers form the different strata.

Plant Hedges

Hedges provide shade, a windbreak, and wildlife habitat. Use various fruiting shrubs for wildlife food. Plant close together in a slight zigzag, avoiding straight lines. If space permits, a more

What and How to Plant (continued)

substantial hedge can be created by planting shrubs in two close rows, about 40 cm apart with 3 shrubs per metre (as recommended by some British hedgerow experts).

Create Thickets

Thickets can substitute for hedges in a small garden. Plant several species of trees and shrubs in a cluster of three to five. If you have room, consider both hedges and thickets or several thickets scattered around your garden.

Develop an Edge

In nature, edges (also known as ecotones) are where one habitat meets another. Edges are the most productive area for flora and fauna. Get the 'edge effect' in gardens by alternating hedges or thickets with open areas such as grassy patches or expanses of flowers or groundcovers.

Establish Plants

To become well established, native plants require as much site- and soil-preparation as alien species. While initially not maintenance-free, once adapted to your site, they will require less watering and upkeep. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides should not be used in a natural garden, but leaf mulch and compost will keep it thriving.

Selecting Plants

Ecoregions (Geographic Regions)

Using the ecoregion concept to develop a list for your garden means selecting plants native to your area. These plants are well adapted to local environmental conditions such as climate and temperature, and are therefore less susceptible to disease and other problems.

Hardiness Zone maps determine which plants, whether native or alien, can survive in a particular climatic zone. An ability to survive does not necessarily mean that the plants are native to your area.

Selecting Plants (continued)

Learn to Identify Local Native Plants

Because many plants found in the wild are naturalized aliens, you need to know which plants are truly native species. Check out the various field guides that are available, or contact local naturalist groups for information specific to your area.

Learn Botanical Names

Both alien and native plants can share the same common name, which can lead to confusion when searching for native plants. Using each plant's botanical name will help avoid the problem. Botanical names are also referred to as scientific, species or Latin names.

Obtaining Native Plants

Do not take plants from the wild.

Collect seeds from the wild only with the landowner's permission. Take a few seeds from many plants, rather than all the seeds from a few. Learn the best time to gather seeds so as not to waste them because of untimely collecting.

Avoid pre-packaged wildflower seed mixes because they often contain many alien, invasive species.

Many garden nurseries and centres sell native plants. Before you buy, ask about the source of the plants. The preferred sources are seeds or cuttings. (Learn more from the leaflet *Natives at Our Nurseries*).

Plant Rescue

Land development and the cutting of roadside verges are two means by which plants are destroyed. Rescuing plants from such sites is a way of preserving vegetation that would otherwise be lost.

Before attempting rescue, seek permission of the relevant landowner (e.g. the municipality, the developer, private individuals).



Obtaining Native Plants (continued)

Many plants do not transplant well because they have specific requirements that might not exist in the new site. Numerous orchid species, for example, have formed a symbiotic relationship with mycorrhizal fungi that cannot be immediately duplicated in a new site. Also, many plants require a particular pH level in the soil. If the alternative is eradication, however, it is better to give the plants a chance in your garden.

When digging up the plants you are trying to rescue, make sure you get the entire root ball and sufficient soil by digging both deep and wide. This will help the plants better adjust to their new environment. Species that have precise requirements are particularly vulnerable to transplant shock. It will also help to cut back about one-third of the transplanted plant, provide shade for the first few days and water well. If possible, try to plan plant rescues for cooler, overcast days. Autumn is a good time for transplanting.