

## ***Surveying Your Garden***

### **Before You Begin**

Because many native plants have specific requirements, you should have a look at your garden in order to determine its characteristics and to help you plan the changes you wish to make. Surveying your garden in order to define the following considerations will help immeasurably in determining what plants you can successfully grow. Also, it helps to plan your garden on paper before you start working on it; although this may seem tedious and unnecessary, it is particularly important when growing native plants.

### **Sun and Shade**

During the growing season, evaluate how much sun and shade your garden receives and where it falls at different times during the day. Keep in mind that even the sunniest garden may have shady pockets created by shadows, perhaps from nearby houses or garden structures.

If your plans call for a woodsier garden, you can provide instant shade in part of your site with a fence until trees and shrubs can fill in. Shade itself may be heavy, light, or filtered, depending on types of trees (coniferous or deciduous), height, and spacing, or on other shade sources. If the shade is produced by deciduous trees, plant spring ephemerals for early-season colour before trees leaf out. Because many native plants are woodland species, your choices should not be limited by a shady site.

### **Exposure**

Most plants grow best in protected sites free from strong winds, drifting snow, etc. Gardens on elevated sites or on slopes will need extra protection. In order to provide better growing conditions on an exposed site, consider planting a hedge or erecting a fence.

### **Soil**

Healthy soil that is full of micro-organisms and rich organic matter provides plants with the nutrients (nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus) that are vital to development. Identifying your soil type is particularly important when planting native species because many have specific requirements. Have your soil tested for fertility, pH level and nutrients. You can do it yourself

## **Soil** (continued)

with kits that are available at most gardening centres, but the results may be less reliable than those attained by professional testing.

Soil that is loamy, well-drained, moisture-retentive and has a good nutrient level is considered the ultimate for most plants. However, certain plants, such as various native cactuses, require dry, sandy soil, while other plants, including many dogwoods and willows, are tolerant of clay sites. Clay soil is heavy, water-retentive and nutrient-rich, while sandy soil is dry, well-drained and usually nutrient-poor. All soil types can be amended by copious quantities of well-composted manure and other organic material, as necessary, and depending on what is being planted.

## **Acid or Alkaline**

A pH reading of 7 is neutral. Alkaline soil will have a reading above that number, while acidic reads below. Soil nutrients and bacteria are most available in the range of 5.5 to 6.5, which is also best for most plants. However, it is important to understand pH requirements of the native plants you are considering because some, such as species of *Vaccinium*, require acidic soil, while others need alkaline conditions to grow. Either soil type can be amended to a certain extent.

## **Moisture Content**

Evaluating the moisture capacity of your site is important because many native plants require specific dry, wet or damp conditions if they are to thrive. A wet site drains poorly, is slow to dry and often has pockets of standing water. Moist areas drain slowly, often retain moisture, but rarely have puddles. Dry sites drain well, which means they can quickly dry out.

## **Uses**

Decide how your garden will be used. Will you build paths, fences or other structures? Do you want a pond or other water features? Do you need large open spaces for children and pets? Plot your garden around these aspects. Remember that adding structures such as fences, sheds or gazebos will create shade for at least part of the day, which you need to take into account when adding plants.

## **Pulling It All Together**

Once you have surveyed your garden and mapped for environmental conditions and various uses, it is time to start implementing your plans. (Learn more from the leaflet *Getting Started in Native Plant Gardening*).

If a complete switch to native plants seems daunting, start small by incorporating a few native species amongst cultivated ones, and add more gradually. Plant several native shrubs, or emulate a native woodland plant community underneath your trees. Replace your lawn with native groundcovers. It is up to you!

Don't be overly concerned with keeping the garden neat and tidy. Nature's disorder is dynamic and interesting. Where possible, retain rock or brush piles, snags (standing dead trees), and let seed-bearing flowers remain standing over winter in order to supply food for wildlife and visual interest in the garden.