



Why Plant the Natives?

Native plants are those that grew in our area before the arrival of settlers from Europe and the eastern United States. The ecosystem then included tall grass prairies, oak savannas, woodlands and wetlands. Once the settlers arrived, virtually all the land was converted to the agricultural land, cities, and industrial sites seen today. Less than 0.1% of the original prairie survives today.

Native plants didn't survive even in the gardens of the settlers because they brought plants from their own countries that eventually squeezed out the native plants. This is unfortunate because the native plants had evolved over thousands of years and had adapted to the geography and climate of our region. The native ecosystems were home to countless varieties of birds, wildlife, butterflies and other insects.

Today more and more people are getting involved in natural landscaping as a way to preserve our heritage. This covers a wide range of gardening activities, from planting a few native species among other plants in one's garden, to planting new gardens composed only of native plants, to removing lawn turf and replanting the entire area with native plants.

There are countless benefits to be gained from using native plants. First, they do not require fertilizers. These plants evolved over a long time to be able to survive, well before the arrival of the first settlers. Fertilizers used today can run off into rivers and lakes, causing increased algae growth and interfering with aquatic ecosystems. In the same vein, native plants require fewer pesticides than lawns, something that many people find attractive. Maintaining a prairie or wetland is also much less expensive over time as compared to the cost of maintaining a lawn.

Native plants also require much less water than lawns and other garden plants. Native plants have amazingly deep root systems - native plants as short as 1-foot tall can have a taproot of up to 15 feet! These root systems increase the ability of the soil to store water, and the introduction of native plants into a flood plain can reduce flooding there.

Using native plants instead of lawn turf also helps to reduce air pollution. Gas powered garden tools emit 5 percent of the nation's air pollution, while native plants do not require mowing and actually remove carbon from the air. Native plants provide shelter and food for birds, insects and other animals, while mowed lawns are not of much use to most wildlife.

Some people have the mistaken notion that native plants attract pests or aggravate allergies. Many native plants are pollinated by insects (not the wind) and do not cause allergies. In fact, many plants responsible for allergies are not native to this area. Native ragweed is one of the only native plants to aggravate allergies. Native plants will also attract birds and wildlife that themselves consume pesky bugs like mosquitoes. Canada geese, regarded as a pest by many, actually prefer short turf grass and can be discouraged by taller, native grasses.

When getting started, remember that transplants will grow more quickly than seeds and may bloom in the first year. Select plants based on the light and moisture conditions on your property. You can save money by buying smaller plants and adequately spacing them in your garden. Be sure to mark them or keep a garden "map" so you can identify them in the future. Native plants that are grown locally are preferable, as they are acclimated to our climate.

Contact the Master Gardener Hotline for information on where you can find locally grown native plants in the your area. They can also provide you with information on which native plants will help to attract songbirds, hummingbirds, butterflies, and other desirable critters. There are also restored and preserved prairies and wetlands in our area where you can see the hard work being done to preserve these beautiful resources.

By Constance McCarthy, University of Illinois Extension Master Gardener, Winnebago County, and Wild Ones member of the Rock River Valley Chapter.