



Landscaping Ideas For the Environment

*What nature delivers to us is never stale
because what nature creates has eternity in it.*
~ Isaac Bashevis Singer, writer

Native Plants - Naturals in the Perennial Garden Common Misconceptions and Some New Ideas

Nature has given us native plants:

Scientists estimate that there are more than 8 million species of plants in the world. Washington State has over 2,300 native species. So why aren't we using more of these native plants to beautify our gardens? Native plants are underutilized because many people have misconceptions about their use and usefulness in urban landscaping.

But you might have heard that:

- ✿ flowers of native plants are insignificant
- ✿ native plants are hard to care for
- ✿ foliage of native plants lacks visual appeal
- ✿ they are difficult to find in nurseries
- ✿ when you do find them, native plants are expensive
- ✿ natives look unnatural growing with non-natives
- ✿ native plants are weedy and look "unmanaged"

Keep reading. There's a different way to think about native plants.

Native plants aren't weedy; they're the natural way to grow!

Under most circumstances *any* plant, native or otherwise, can look weedy or unmanaged if not properly cared for. Native plants thrive in native soil, moisture and temperature conditions. These are plants that feel right at home in the Pacific Northwest. A gentle pruning once in a while may be necessary and the cuttings look great in natural arrangements.

Natives add visual interest in a non-native, perennial garden

If you aren't ready to make the commitment to going 100% native, try adding a few natives alongside your favorite non-native perennials. In shaded and moist areas plant **redwood oxalis** (*Oxalis oregana*) or **bunchberry** (*Cornus unalaschensis*) as delicate groundcovers. Many fern species add year-round greenery and provide beautiful contrast to brightly colored summer flowers. Try **deer fern** (*Blechnum spicant*) in moist soils; use **sword fern** (*Polystichum munitum*) in a sunnier location.

As native plants have become popular, availability has increased

People are discovering the benefits of adding native plants to their garden. As a result, local nurseries are carrying natives to meet the demands of their customers. Encourage your local nursery to carry native plants, then support their decision by purchasing your plants there. Pick up a free copy of the *Specialty Nursery Guide, NW Washington Edition*. This excellent resource, available at most nurseries, lists many sources of native plants in the Puget Sound region. The WNPS website posts a list of resources for native plants and seeds, listing local nurseries that carry a good collection of native plants.

Most native plants cost the same as non-natives

An increased interest in native plant gardening means more nurseries get native plants from local suppliers and can pass on the savings to their customers. Additionally, most natives are perennials, which are more cost-effective, in the long run, than annuals. Many native plants multiply by seed dispersal or underground rhizomes. After only a few years, you will probably have several new plants to transplant to other garden locations.

Native plant foliage is diverse, delicate and dramatic

Each of us has likes and dislikes in the plant world. The spring unfolding of fresh, new **vine maple** (*Acer circinatum*) leaves or the emergence of soft, green needles on **western hemlock** (*Tsuga heterophylla*) can brighten the spirit during an overcast spring day. Crush a **wild ginger** (*Asarum caudatum*) leaf to release its pungent, aromatic essence. The delicate, lacey foliage of **pacific bleeding heart** (*Dicentra formosa*) looks beautiful in many locations, grows easily, and fills in splendidly as a groundcover.

Native plants nearly take care of themselves, and save water too!

With some forethought and planning, even a beginner will have success using native plants in the urban garden. Pay attention to soil conditions and note seasonal light and moisture changes so that you **work with existing conditions in your yard**. An excellent book that demystifies plant placement, is *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest*, by Art Kruckeberg. All plants, even natives, need nurturing during their first two years. Provide adequate water, a moderate amount of natural fertilizer and plenty of organic mulch.

- ✿ once native plants are established they require less maintenance than non-natives
- ✿ native plants have co-evolved with native insects, fungi, plant diseases and wildlife for thousands of years, thus optimizing their survival chances
- ✿ native groundcovers significantly slow the spread of invasive weeds
- ✿ native plants attract native wildlife, birds and butterflies, many of which depend on the plants for shelter, food or larval development
- ✿ native plants are adapted to growing in this region's climate and soil; once established, they require less watering and fertilizer than many non-natives

Flowering native plants are attractive to humans (and insects like them, too)

At first glance it's true, many flowers of native plants don't seem to have the attention-grabbing charisma of the non-natives. But look closer – you will be rewarded by what you see. Also, many natives have flowers that attract wildlife. The nectar of **red-flowering currant** (*Ribes sanguineum*) provides early spring nourishment for hummingbirds, as do the trumpet-shaped flowers of **orange honey-suckle** (*Lonicera ciliosa*). **Nootka rose** (*Rosa nutkana*) has pink, delicately scented petals and **yellow and blue violets** (*Viola sempervirens* and *Viola adunca*) are charming additions to the garden as well.

SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast. Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon, Eds. 1994.
Flora of the Pacific Northwest: An Illustrated Manual. C. Leo Hitchcock and Arthur Cronquist. 1973.
Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest, 2nd Edition. Arthur R. Kruckeberg. 1996.
Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest. Russell Link. 1999.
Native Plants in the Coastal Garden, 2nd Edition. April Pettinger. 2002.
Grow Your Own Native Landscape. Item MISC0273, WSU Cooperative Extension. Revised 6/99.
(call 1-800-723-1763)
Propagation of Pacific Northwest Native Plants. Robin Rose, Chachulski and Haase. 1998.

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