

Including Native Plants in Your Garden

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First of all, realize that "native" is different for each of us. Native to my state is different than native to your state. Native to the northern part of my state, or the mountainous part, or the desert part, is different from native to my immediate locale, the southern coastal part of California. Some plants adapt to several of these microclimates, other plants are much more particular and will not grow well out of their preferred territory.

To learn about natives for your state, here are some resources to try: wildflower guides, hiking/backpacking guides, wild foraging guides, local herbal guides, university extensions, university extension websites, eNature.com (very general, but can get you started), specific web searches ...

Some states have more information available than others. Try to approach it with an attitude of discovery and fun; after all, you are meeting your "neighbors", you are getting to know new plant-friends.

Realize that your local warehouse store, and even your local gardening supply chain-store, are not the place to look for native plants information! Most likely, their stock is exclusively greenhouse-bred hybrids and exotics. Find out whether your state has a native plant society. Perhaps there is an organized group, who would most certainly have suggestions for plants, sources, cultivation methods. Native plant enthusiasts may offer listings for native plant nurseries. Meet people, and ask questions. In exploring the realm of native plants, you are delving into a specialty field. You are venturing into a rich arena where your research and resourcefulness will become as significant a garden tool as your handy spade.

Are there any botanic gardens, or local natural-style parks, or wilder spaces near the place you are gardening? Take hikes and observe. Observe individual species, but also observe plant combinations. No plant lives in isolation; most grow happily with their companions, and the field guides, the wild-places observations, even the native plant sources, all can tip you off to what likes to grow with what. Some plants have symbiotic relationships - they like to "hang out with their friends". Perhaps one of the plants is a nutrient fixer and the other a heavy user. Perhaps both of the plants typically grow at the same time in the local rotational cycle. Either way, in designing your native plantings, it is wise to imitate nature's groupings.

Field guides, usually in the nature section of your local bookstore, are often labeled as "wildflower guides". The better ones have botanic names connected with them. You might also look into local guides put out for hikers and backpackers, and wild food foragers. Local parks and conservation spots may have resource guides available.

Online, some of the sweeping national sites like eNature.org give some botanic names which could get you started. Realize that national sites like this can only merely scratch the surface of any one local area. Better to search for more specific local information sources. These are often collected by native plant groups, universities, and fellow native plant lovers. I have located some amazing websites

devoted to natives in my state (see below). I have also researched native plant communities via ethnobotany and Native American books.

Try to buy your plants and seeds as close to your garden's location as possible so that you're not introducing exotic cousins into your local gene pool. As a California gardener, I am continually amazed by how many out-of-state sources claim to supply "California poppy" seeds. Are these natives? Not the kind I'm after! Realize that seeds grown further from your locale will be descended from plants which have had to adapt to different growing conditions. The parent plants may have been selected for different attributes than you are seeking, with respect to cold hardiness, water tolerance, durability, disease, fertility, etc. Continuing my California poppy example, if I buy from a local specialty source, I have a choice of which California poppy - I can select the lighter yellow *Eschscholzia californica* var. *californica* that is a near-perennial in my dry coastal area, rather than the deeper orange *Eschscholzia californica* var. *crocea* from inland meadows.

Listen to veterans, and pay heed to your wild-spot observations, when it comes to environment. In my state, there are some natives that can exist on next to no water. California's *Dendromecon* and *Ceanothus* will grow disproportionately and die an early death if given any irrigation. By contrast, our *Limnanthes douglasii* yearns for environment that imitates its origins in vernal pools. Some plants want a simulated forest floor mulch around their toes, while others yearn for gritty sand. A few natives will tolerate "regular garden care" of pruning and watering, fertilizing and cultivating. Many will die when given too much well meaning fussing. As you design your native plants garden, you must know which plants want what type of care. Consciously group those plants which have similar culture requirements, and separate these from plants which have different needs. Remember that while a plant may survive out of its element, it will rarely thrive, and a weakened plant is susceptible to insect and disease attacks.

You will soon come to realize that "gardening with natives" is not just about plants. When I planted the native plants section of my garden, I was amazed at the life that blossomed forth. New bird species appeared in my yard, to nibble the wildflower seedheads. Butterflies flittered everywhere. Ladybug larvae, Anise Swallowtail chrysalis (what's the plural of that?), hoverflies, oh, the populations that appeared! My garden gained excellent pollinators, aphid eaters, and so much more! Take time to get acquainted with your native critters. And make a commitment, make a promise, to continue to provide them with a home. Register your property with the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat program <http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/>

The Humane Society has a program too, at <http://www.hsus.org/ace/12006>

Realize that some critters will only breed around specific plant species. When you as the gardener are selecting the plants for your land, the fate of these critters is in the balance. Your inclusion of that specific buckwheat just may provide that little blue butterfly with one more chance to continue existence in this voracious modern world.

Gardening with natives will reward you in ways you never dreamed. I have devoted a portion of my limited city lot to wildlife habitat, with almost exclusively native plantings. It brings great joy to my spirit, as well as wonderful birds, butterflies, beneficial insects, and wonderment for my children.

for great info on California natives, check out:
<http://www.laspilitas.com/plants/plants.htm>
<http://elib.cs.berkeley.edu/flowers/>
<http://www.cnps.org/links/links.htm>
<http://davis herb.ucdavis.edu/CNPSActiveServer/index.html>

<http://mamba.bio.uci.edu/~pjbryant/biodiv/bflyplnt.htm>

<http://www.larnerseeds.com/>

Edible and Useful Plants of California, by Charlotte Bringle Clarke

Butterfly Gardening in Southern California, by Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Roadside Plants of Southern California, by Thomas J Belzer

Weeds of the West, by Tom D Whitson et al

Landscape Plants for Western Regions, by Bob Perry

Before the wilderness: environmental management by native Californians, Thomas C. Blackburn ed.