

Buzz about native plants



Julie Burchstead
Master Gardener

Question: My friends say planting native plants are best for the environment. But I love my peonies and dahlias. Are they saying I should no longer plant the things I love? What is this trend all about?

Answer: As with all change, along with the enthusiasm, come some strident voices. No, you do not need to strip your yard of every ornamental plant that has given you joy.

Planting natives is beyond a hot trend. It is a shift in vision and practice from seeing our gardens as space we must defend against the natural world, to seeing our gardens as an extension of nature.

As we've discovered, certain non-native plants have problematic habits such as invasiveness outside our gardens where it becomes ethical to make appropriate choices. And, learning the science driving the "Plant Natives" movement may forever cause you to garden with a wider, perhaps more judicious lens.

But with careful selection for your yard, native plants grow companionably alongside well-loved ornamentals.

For years, my gardens were expanded based on personal tastes. I chose fruits and vegetables based on what I liked to eat, selected plants for color, scent, bloom time, aesthetics, shared starts from family and friends, and truth be told, the sale table at my local nursery. I didn't think much about where the plants originated.

In fact, exotic and unusual plants were a badge of honor. I tucked things into the ground and defended them vigorously against the world. I didn't understand the relationship (or non-relationship) my plantings had on native birds and insects. After all, my garden buzzed with honeybees – European honeybees. A winter's reading a few years ago caused me to rethink my practices.

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better." – Maya Angelou.

OSU's McMahan, Szonntag and Stoven write of the benefits of planting Oregon natives in your home garden:

- They are adapted to our local soils and weather (thrive with fewer resources)



PHOTO BY JANET DONNELLY, OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

Good for containers, Oregon irises range in color from violet to purple, though are occasionally white or yellow.



PHOTO BY LINDA MCMAHAN, OSU

Rapid growers, red flowering currant plants are available in shades of red, pink and white.



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

Best used in moist locations, pacific ninebark is a multistemmed deciduous shrub that can grow to 8 feet or more.



PHOTO BY BONNIE COURTER

Western azaleas are good for small urban gardens as well as for those meant to draw in butterflies.

- They provide food and habitat for local wildlife

- They have importance to pollinators (Many have evolved over eons to have symbiotic relationships with specific pollinators)

- They are non-invasive in wild habitats

Their complete article (EC1577, October 2022), available free at extension.oregonstate.edu/pub/ec-1577, has pages of photographs of Oregon native plants, including their growing needs, to make selection easier.

There are more and more local nurseries offering native plants for purchase. Douglas County Master Gardeners will have some native plants available at our plant sale this May. Native plants are also available at The Elkton Community Education Center, and year round at Doak Creek Native Plant Nursery (outside of Eugene), and Plant Oregon (Talent).

Doak Creek Nursery has a catalog list online that provides the latin names for all the plants they sell.

When shopping for natives in local nurseries, read plant tags carefully. If a name appears in quotes after the latin name, the specimen is likely a cultivar – modified in some way for color or bloom shape. Some of these modifications are aesthetically pleasing to humans, but can create accessibility issues for native pollinators.

Planting even a few native plants can transform our gardens from food desert islands of alien fauna into an interconnected network of nature. Entomologist Doug Tallamy believes yard by yard, one plant at a time, we can piece together quilts of local habitat. He calls this a Homegrown National Park.

I look out at my sleeping garden. Not far from where my European hellebores will announce winter's

end stands an Oregon native red-flowering currant, locally grown.

Ribes sanguinum, with dangling magenta gem blossoms, has become a new feast for my spring hungry eyes (and is also one of the earliest sources of food for native mason bees and hummingbirds). We have all seen the headlines about how our native bird and butterfly species are depleting. What if we can help, even in a small way?

Our gardens, like all creative endeavors, are an extension of our hearts.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.