

Native Plants in the Ornamental Garden

What is a “native plant”? The definition from the USDA (US Department of Agriculture) is accepted by groups as diverse as farmers, botanists and gardeners. Simply stated, native plants are those that were already present in their geography when the first Europeans arrived. Many imported plants such as Dandelions have escaped into the wild and are referred to as “naturalized”. But they never can be called natives, no matter how long their tenure or widespread their distribution. Note: until technology introduced tissue culture and gene splicing, every plant was a native somewhere!

Location, Location, Location

When selecting plants for our landscapes, gardeners should look to local and regional natives that are adapted to our specific climate and soil. An Oregon or Florida native plant would likely perish in our area. (Note: natives of Turkey and south-central China are likely to flourish in Kansas!) You may wish to also welcome naturalized plants like Queen Anne's Lace because they too have proven their success in the cruel Kansas environment.

Native plants do not thrive in spite of all indignities. Like ornamentals, they must be planted in the right place, i.e., a garden site similar to their native habitat. For instance, the Butterfly Weed's glorious splash of orange will quickly fade and die if planted in a shady wet spot. Likewise, if a Jack-in-the Pulpit is planted in dry, full sun, it will say 'adios' just as quickly as your Hostas. And all perennials, including natives, must be watered the first year or two until they develop the extensive tap-roots that bestow drought-tolerance. The Extension Master Gardeners' mantra still applies: “Right Plant, Right Place.” Remember, there is no such thing as a “no maintenance garden” and “low maintenance” is a matter of opinion. You will always need to weed and water unless you replace all plants with artificial turf and plastic flowers.

Expanding Your Palette of Native Plants

The Kansas State University Extension website has literally hundreds of articles on native plant gardening. Many of these garden favorites differ from the original native species. They may be selected varieties, which come true to seed. Or they may be hybrids, which result from the crossing of two different species. The offspring usually do not come true to seed and may be sterile. Should these altered plants be considered natives? Controversy abounds and much more research is needed. However, we already know that a blanket statement, "hybrids are less nutritious", is not true. Native plant aficionados proclaim that natives are the only correct choice for an environmentally-sensitive gardener. However, the appearance and growth habits of purely native plants may not meet the aesthetic needs of many gardeners or municipalities. Is a compromise possible?

Clues to Caring

Neighbors and municipal governments hate chaos. If you adapt a more natural gardening style (with or without natives), much conflict can be avoided if you purposefully include structures that demonstrate that the garden is not an abandoned mess of weeds. These "Clues to Caring" signal that this is a carefully planned and maintained garden. That means no plopping of plants into any open space! The garden should be designed with definite lines and forms, made obvious with hardscaping. Outlining all beds and paths with borders of rocks, bricks, or logs, etc. greatly contributes to a civilized look. And if you keep these edges clean with pruning and weeding, your garden will look neat and manicured even if the plants are rioting in the beds. Inclusion of artwork further demonstrates deliberate caring. In addition to sculptures and containers, outdoor furniture provides a reassuring human element among the masses of plant material.

Guidelines for Success (for Both Natives and Ornamentals!)

- Design your garden first on paper and research any possible new plant before purchase. Right Plant, Right Place.
- Mulch! Heavy surface applications of organic matter replace synthetic fertilizers as well as suppressing weeds and conserving moisture.
- Maintain and groom. Be fierce in eradicating unwanted plants, AKA weeds. Keep the edges of beds and paths tightly trimmed to give your garden the tidy look that people expect.

Both natives and ornamentals have a wide range of plants that can be highly needy or thrive on neglect. Success depends more on the gardener's planning and maintenance than on the plant.