

Landscaping with Native Plants

The growing conditions in Kansas and Missouri can be a challenge for gardeners. We have no mountains or oceans to temper the climate, so our plants face wild fluctuations in cold, heat, wind and water.

Native plants, however, are already adapted to these extreme conditions and perform beautifully. They have survived for thousands of years by adapting themselves to local conditions. Gardening with natives offers a delightful and diverse treasure of plants and once established require minimal maintenance.

“If one way be better than another, that you may be sure is nature’s way.”
—Aristotle

What Is a Native Plant?

A **native plant** is one that was growing in North America before the Europeans settled here. These plants have evolved naturally, spreading seeds by animals, birds, wind and water, and adapted themselves to our specific environmental conditions.

What isn’t a native plant? It is a plant spread accidentally or deliberately by human intervention. Sometimes these alien plants become invasive—such as kudzu— and threaten the continued existence of native plants.

There are hundreds of plants that are native to Kansas and Missouri. There is truly a native annual, perennial, tree, shrub, vine, grass, or fern for every garden.

Why Go Native?

The reasons for growing native plants are compelling.

- They require little maintenance. When properly placed in a habitat that is similar to their native one, they need little supplemental water, no fertilizer and no chemical pesticides. This is good news for gardeners!
- They add beauty to the landscape and preserve our natural heritage.
- Native plants provide food and habitat for birds, butterflies and other desirable wildlife.
- They are self-sustaining, vigorous and hardy. Because they are adapted to a local region, native plants tend to resist damage from freezing, drought, common diseases and plant-eating animals.
- Native plants decrease the amount of water needed for landscape maintenance.
- They produce long root systems to hold soil in place.
- Native plants protect water quality by controlling soil erosion and moderating floods and droughts.
- The diversity of native plants includes interesting flowers and foliage. Native shrubs and trees provide a variety of heights, shapes and textures in the landscape. Many provide winter interest through their bark or seed pods.

Obtaining Native Plants

Never dig a native plant from the wild. One could be destroying the habitat in which the plant needs to grow.

Buy only nursery propagated plants. “Nursery propagated” means a plant was grown from cuttings, division or seed by a nursery. Plant labels can be misleading. “Nursery grown” does not always mean nursery propagated. Ask your nursery person to make sure.

Buy from nurseries in your growing area. When possible, it is best to buy plants within 100 miles or so from where you live. Even a plant that is native to a wider region may be different with respect to its hardiness and heat tolerance.

Buy plants that are the native species. Many natives are cultivated, selected, and reintroduced as specific cultivars. They may or may not perform the same or provide the same benefits as the true native species.

Pick the right plants.

- Select plants whose natural habitat is similar to the growing conditions you can provide in your garden with regard to soil, light and moisture.
- Buy small plants. They are easier to transplant and quicker to establish. Native trees often sink a deep taproot, thus making them difficult to transplant, except as container grown (small) plants.
- Visit regional botanical gardens, wilderness areas, and restored prairies to see plants in their natural splendor.
- Contact native plant societies and prairie preservation organizations for suggested plants in the region.

Guidelines for Successfully Using Native Plants

Landscaping with native plants is not gardening gone wild. The same principles of design and plant care apply to both ornamental and native plants.

Study the conditions in your landscape

Most home landscapes have several microclimates. A microclimate is the sun, shade, exposure, wind, and drainage factors that affect plant growth in a relatively small area. Determine the microclimates in the different areas of your property by studying it.

There are probably places that are colder or warmer, receive more sun or more shade, and have good or poor drainage. Look for differences in light (all seasons), moisture retention, exposure to wind, sloped areas, and depressions that naturally collect water. In this way, for example, you can identify areas where conditions are most like a woodland prairie, bank of a stream, roadside ditch or dry, rocky slope.

Native plants are adapted to a specific environment, and that environment needs to be reproduced as closely as possible when it comes to soil type, exposure to sun, wind and annual rainfall. Native plants support and are supported by the environment in which they grow.

Get a soil test

Test the soil before you plant. It is important to know your soil type because it fosters the beneficial microbes and organisms that help to ensure the survival of a plant. Use a soil test to find out:

- If the pH is compatible with the needs of the native plants you select.
- The type of plants your soil will support.
- If you need to add organic matter.

Soil Testing

For more information go to www.johnson.ksu.edu and click **Lawn and Garden > Soil Testing**

Space plants correctly

Space the plants according to their mature height and spread.

Be patient and you will be rewarded. Native trees, shrubs and perennials may seem to grow slowly at first, but they are doing the important work of establishing their all-important root systems. Native plants often need two or three years to mature. Trees and shrubs can take longer. Once the root system is established, the growth rate for these plants will more than make up for their slowness in getting started.

Weed

- Remove all weeds before you plant.
- After planting, keep the garden weed free by hand pulling any invaders.
- Do not use herbicides. These chemicals are not used by nature to manage weeds and can easily damage or kill the native plants you've established, wasting your valuable time and money spent planting them.

Mulch

- Use several inches of an organic mulch. Besides improving the soil as it decomposes, mulch suppresses weeds and helps maintain more constant soil temperature and moisture levels.
- Mulch trees and shrubs several feet out from the base of the trunk to suppress weeds, conserve moisture and prevent damage from lawn equipment.
- Use fall leaves as mulch. Either leave the leaves that have fallen on their own or move leaves from other places in your yard (versus bagging and throwing them away) to your native planting beds. Fall leaves will decompose and provide needed organic materials to support your native plants.

Do not fertilize

Fertilizing native plants can upset their natural balance. Avoid fertilizer.

Water

After they are established, native plants need little additional water. They have developed the means to survive drought. Those plants that are found in average or dry soils can literally drown if they receive too much water.

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