

Landscaping With Native Plants

Over the last few years, there has been an increased interest in using native plants in our landscapes. In the past, many of our native plants were looked down upon, with the focus being on plants from other parts of the world. Since these foreign plants were sometimes unique, they were seen as better. As has been shown with many of these plants, this is definitely not the case. Many of these foreign plants have become extremely invasive and detrimental to our native plant populations. There are many reasons and benefits to using native plants in our landscapes, so let us take a look at a few of them.

First off, native plants are adapted to local soils and environmental conditions. At first glance, this may not seem that important, but it certainly is. The plants of this region have been growing here for hundreds of years and have become adapted to the local fluctuations and extremes in the weather. We had a very unusual freeze this year that affected many of our native trees, but this is not typical. It is usually the non-native species that are damaged by late frosts whereas our native species come out mostly undamaged. Do not let this freak occurrence scare you from planting native trees in the landscape.

Even though our locally native plants have evolved with our soil conditions, you still must be aware of the exact soil conditions that you have. This affects plant selection and long term sustainability. For example, you do not want to plant a white oak in an area that holds a lot of moisture. White oak is an upland tree not adapted to wet soil conditions, and will languish and

eventually die in such a site. Make sure you do your homework before you plant.

Native plants can also be a great choice for areas that do not receive large amounts of water. I love to use native prairie plants in many of my landscape designs. Once established, they do not require much in the way of maintenance. This is great for homeowners that want to have attractive beds of flowers but do not want to be tied up with a great deal of weeding and watering.

Another great way to use these native prairie plants is on slopes. These plants do a great job of penetrating their roots deep into the soil and stabilizing the slope. In this way they help prevent soil erosion as well as filtering storm water run off. A small prairie-like setting can be established fairly inexpensively and with low maintenance costs. The most maintenance is in the first two years, making sure that the plants are establishing and keeping the weeds out. Once the small prairie becomes established, it does a great job of choking out competing weeds and becomes very low maintenance. With the appropriate mix of plants, you can have a carefree, nonstop show of color all year long. I am now in the process of evaluating some locations in town to use this beneficial landscaping concept in the future.

Another benefit of using native plants in our landscapes is that they have evolved with our local insects and diseases. When you use non-native plants, many times they can be greatly affected by these problems. Non-native plant's defensive systems are not able to cope with these new problems, which can lead to the quick death of stressed plants.

A final reason to use natives in our landscapes is the benefits that they

provide to our local wildlife. Native plants are great food and habitat sources, not only for game animals, but also birds and butterflies. Some of the most beautiful and effective hummingbird and butterfly gardens use only native plant material.

I believe that we need to put even more emphasis on using native plants in our landscapes and communities. There are so many wonderful plants that are locally adapted, but they continue to be underused in our landscape designs. We need to erase the stigma that native plants are not useful or beautiful, and begin to embrace all of their benefits to the landscape and environment. When it comes to landscaping with native plants we have only scratched the surface. There are still endless opportunities to incorporate these beautiful, adaptable, and beneficial plants into our urban designs.