

## **INTRODUCTION TO NATIVE PLANTS**

### **WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?**

PLANT NATIVES! We are bombarded with articles in newspapers, magazines, online on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Garden Club speaker series, you name it, but do you really understand it?

The goal of this article is to offer a brief overview of native plants, what they are, (and aren't), why they're so important, and why everyone is trying so hard to get you to incorporate them into your landscape.

Let's start with some definitions:

A plant is NATIVE to a region where it has a long evolutionary history. In North America, we generally consider plants to be native if they were present prior to European settlement, after which time new plant species were commonly introduced from all over the globe. In a word, natives are locals.

NATURALIZED plants are introduced species that have established self-sustaining populations, reproducing in the landscape without human assistance. A naturalized plant is not native. Naturalized species often become invasive, overtaking and eradicating natives, while others can be less aggressive. Although they can develop functional relationships with fauna and other species here, they lack the significant ecological relationships that native plants have developed over thousands of years of co-evolution with other plants, animals, fungi and bacteria. These complex relations keep an ecosystem stable.

### **WHY DO WE NEED NATIVES?**

Modern life has let us forget about the basics – native plants are at the heart of our ecosystem. These plants are the center of the food web for the rest of life on earth. Sounds dramatic, right? Dr. Doug Tallamy said it best “It is the balance of co-evolutionary relationships that allows millions of different species to all live closely together. In a local ecosystem, only the plants that have evolved over an extended period of time with the other flora and fauna present can successfully feed the entire web and keep it stable.”

You don't know Doug? His book "Bringing Nature Home" explains how you can sustain wildlife with native plants. His more recent book "Nature's Best Hope," offers a new approach to conservation that starts in your yard. They are must reads!

Let's get back to the importance of natives and those complex relationships. Natives host the insects that we must have, much more so than non-natives. Without the natives, the insects decline. To add to the problem we have become a nation of "sprayers," killing all insects that enter our landscapes and interfere with our cookouts. Problem with that is you are not only killing mosquitoes, you're killing beneficial insects which in turn threatens our bird population and upsets the pollination system.

You have all heard about the monarch and milkweed relationship by now. These butterflies can only survive and reproduce on milkweed. Some pollinators are "generalists" meaning they can pollinate a number of plant species, others are "specialists" and can only pollinate a single species.

So, we lose some insects. What does that mean to us? Remember the balance? Plants provide the foundation for life by capturing the energy from the sun and converting it to biomass that we eat.

If we would like to survive as humans and want a sustainable future (I'm raising my hand), it is critical that we start and continue to add natives.

Ok! Do I have your attention? Are you now onboard with the native thing? Are you asking yourself "What do I do next?" Don't be overwhelmed, start small. You do not need to tear out your entire garden, borders and expanse of lawn. Do a little research (I list some resources at the end of this article). Planting natives is like planting anything else. You site them to your conditions, i.e., soil, moisture and light. A bonus of natives is they can require less water, fertilizer and maintenance than traditional garden plantings.

What else to do? Put down the pesticides, especially the neonicotinoids. Don't be in a rush to clean up your landscape in the fall. Learn to appreciate that insects overwinter in hollow stalks of dead perennials. Leaf litter is free and critical to soil health. Shred it and mulch with it rather than sending it off to our landfills. Amphibians, reptiles, fungi will all thank you. It will suppress weeds and feed the

soil lessening the need for added fertilizers. Consider downsizing the turf lawn, saving fuel, work and creating a more productive and ecofriendly space.

The benefits of natives and a healthy ecosystem go on and on, just know this: EVERY GARDEN MATTERS AND EVERY LANDSCAPE COUNTS. Grow Native Massachusetts chose this as their motto with good reason. If everyone did just a little toward this goal, it would create a continuous corridor of natives. Our conservation areas and parks are no longer enough to address the crisis we currently face.

A final quote from Doug Tallamy:

“Humans cannot live as the only species on this planet because it is other species that create the ecosystem services essential to our survival. Every time we force a species to extinction, we promote our own demise. Biodiversity is not optional.”

Go plant something native.

Linda Oliver Hughes

### **Suggested Reading**

Gardening for Life by Doug Tallamy

How and Why to use Native Plants by Margret Roach

Native Plants for the Small Yard by Kate Brandes

Bringing Nature Home by Doug Tallamy

Nature's Best Hope by Doug Tallamy

Native Plants of the Northeast by Donald Leopold

### **Resources**

Rhode Island Wild Plant Society

North American Native Plant Society

American Horticultural Society

Audubon Society

National Wildlife Federation

Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder

Great-Resources/Experts-Videos/Restoring-Natures-Relationships-At Home