

Going Native

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A great stir has been occurring in recent years about using native plants in our landscapes. Natives have many benefits including their low-input thriftiness and amazing adaptability. I am the first to grumble when my “foo-foo” exotic plants aren’t performing like they were supposed to. Not enough rain, too hot, too cold, you name it, there are many reasons why a plant that doesn’t originate here may not live up to its reputation.

Local wildflower expert, Chery Tolley, owner of Sand Hill Farms in Rockford, says that once established in the landscape, native plants are rugged beauties that can not only outperform our exotic hybrids, but will duke it out with just about any weather Michigan has in store for them. For example, native grasses are not only beautiful, says Tolley, they have incredibly deep root systems that can sustain them through many days of drought.

Sustainability

What amazes me about some of the plants known to be native to prairie settings is their range of adaptability. Several years ago, a friend gave me a cup plant, which normally thrives in a rich moist soil, but is doing very well in my “droughty” sand. Tolley cited another example of dune grass, planted on heavy clay. It was doing fine. Michigan has such a mix of clay-based soils intermingled with gravelly sand. If you observe the natives, often they are happily growing in either setting.

Tolley is one of a growing number of Michigan native plant producers who extol their virtues for use in today’s landscape. Since these plants have existed in our climate for ages, natives naturally adapt to feast or famine growing conditions that cultivated exotic plants often succumb to. “Beautiful in their own way, these plants are not necessarily known as the “drama queens” that we have come to expect from ornamental garden plants. However, they may surprise you,” she said. Rattlesnake Master has a unique thorny appearance, but its fragrance is as sweet as honey.

For the most part, native plants have been introduced to consumers in the wildflower-prairie style. Traditional gardeners may find this appearance a bit too wild and rangy. What people don’t understand, says Tolley, is that you can intertwine native Michigan plants in colorful vignettes within your existing landscape. Tolley has interwoven stately natives like compass plant and cup plant with delicate daylilies and interesting shrubs. *Asclepias* (butterfly weed) is a colorful summer bloomer. When mixed with *Baptisia* (false indigo), not only is the bloom season extended but this combo is a nice substitute for a tidy garden shrub. Her entire garden is a mix of plants that naturally attracts hummingbirds, butterflies and later in the fall becomes a good food source for native prairie birds.

Do your homework

Tolley notes that in a rich fertile soil, adaptable natives can also become invasive. Her garden was completely taken over by a beautiful six-foot prairie plant known as Rosin weed in just three short years. Known for its cheerful yellow blooms that lead to heavy seed production, the birds love them. “I just bought one small plant!” she said. The next year there were a few more and the next year they were coming up everywhere and out competing the other plants. “Do your homework,” she says. With a little research, you should be able to come up with a great list of adaptable plants just right for your garden.

Many counties have little known places to observe plantings of native plants. Two really neat places to visit in the West Michigan area to learn about natives are the Hudsonville Nature Center and Loda Lake Wild Flower Sanctuary in Newaygo County. Tolley says these are some of the best kept secrets for easy day trips.

Michigan State has additional resources on native plants because of their ability to bring in beneficial insects and pollinators. Read facts about individual plants and view which ones are the most successful when it comes to attracting insects and pollinators. Please visit <http://nativeplants.msu.edu/> for more information. You can also find a list of Native Plant producers at <http://www.mnppa.org/>.