



How to Grow Native Plants in Your Garden

By | Izabella Redlinski, Conservation Ecologist, Keller Science Action Center, Field Museum

Artwork by Peggy Macnamara | Design by Alicia Diaz



If you're gearing up to add native plants to your yard this spring, then congratulations! You'll make your space more beautiful, with the added bonus of creating habitat for monarchs, butterflies and other pollinators (like bees, beetles, and birds) around you.

Before you start digging in, take a moment to plan the layout of the garden (or a small strip of land along a fence—the pollinators will appreciate that as well). While doing this, take the following into consideration:

Do you already have natural features in your garden (trees, rose bushes, other annual or perennial plants)?

There's no need to get rid of them; think about planting around the existing landscape in your yard.

How would you describe the area where you wish to plant? Is it sunny or part shade? Wet or dry?

Determining this early on in the process will allow you to focus on the species you need. Take note of the moisture and sun exposure each species requires. In general, prairie plants tend to love full sun, savanna plants tolerate some shade, and woodland plants do best in part to full shade.

Are you planting a large area in the middle of your front lawn, or a modest strip along a fence or by the garage?

This might influence what kinds of flowers you choose. For example, unless you are planting really large areas, do not plant species that can grow over six feet tall (prairie dock or compass plant come to mind). They might visually dwarf the area you are working with (if you create a visual screen, however, go for the tall giant ironweed and big bluestem). When planting in a circle arrangement, plant the shorter species on the outside so they're visible in front of the taller species.

Draw the plan on a sheet of paper.

This can include the flower color, height, and time of blooming. In this case, a little planning goes a long way. By thinking ahead about some of these factors, you can plan for a garden that blooms and provides food for pollinators throughout the growing season.

Start slowly.

Try a few species during the first year, adding in more as time goes on. This will allow you to get a sense of where you have "blooming gaps" and understand the true conditions in your garden—it might

appear wetter or drier than you previously thought, and the plants can help you determine that.

Cluster flowers and grasses.

Groups of five or more individuals of the same species are more successful in attracting pollinators.

Consider certifying your native garden for wildlife, pollinators or specifically monarchs.

A simple sign indicates to the public that you are doing something for the environment and might be a great conversation starter and first step in convincing your community to take part.

Pick your native plants by going to local native plant sales.

If you need few ideas, you can see what grows in our Rice Native Gardens or check out our guide to monarch butterfly and garden habitat creation.

Plant near a water source so you can water for the first two years.

After this, these plants will do pretty well on their own, without the need for fertilizer or water!

Take pride in your native garden.

It might not be the showiest the first year around, but you won't have to plant it annually. Every year the plants will become stronger, larger, and bloom more fully. Soon you will find your garden abuzz with insects and birds that rely on these prairie, savanna, and woodland plants.

Introduce Diversity.

Plant different species with varying plant shapes and sizes. Make sure to include plants that bloom early (spring ephemerals) and late (many asters) in the year. Have plants in different plant families like legumes. Do not underestimate grasses and sedges that provide shelter for many insects and add beautiful texture to your garden.



Native Plant Benefits

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Native plant benefits	How it helps	Why it matters
Provide home and food for the monarch butterfly...	Milkweeds are the hostplants for the monarch butterfly. Monarch caterpillars only feed on milkweeds to grow and thrive. No milkweeds, no monarch caterpillars	Monarch populations have decreased over 80%, and preserving the butterfly also means preserving its incredible annual migration from Mexico to Canada and back
... any many other pollinators	Native pollinators such as butterflies, bees, and moths evolved with these local plants. By planting the flora native to your area, you provide the pollinators with the food and shelter they need	Native pollinator numbers have plummeted: both in amount of insects and species present. We rely on insects for many services, including pollination of our foods
Help birds	Native plants provide food (in form of seed and berries) and shelter for the birds. They also host many insects that serve food for the birds, especially the young	In North America, we have 3 billion fewer birds than 50 years ago, and many species are on the decrease – mostly due to lack of habitat and food
Clean water	Native plants are adapted to the dry conditions and require little to no watering once established. They also need no fertilizer, saving extra nutrients from entering waterways and saving you money	Fertilizer run-off is a major problem in waterways adding unnecessary nutrients and resulting in algae blooms and other environmental problems such as the dead zone in Gulf of Mexico. By planting native plants you help to absorb extra nutrients and lower pollution effects downstream
Clean air	Native plants absorb CO2 and other pollutants	Areas with little greenery are correlated with having more asthma and other respiratory diseases, by planting plants you are helping to improve air quality
Health: mental and physical	Studies show that being exposed to green spaces has positive influences in mental and physical health. Experiencing nature decreases stress levels, can lower diabetes and influence mental well-being	Diabetes, heart failure and other diseases are becoming major causes of death. Lowering causes of these illnesses contributes to increased well-being
Beauty	Native plants are beautiful and showy – there are species for each season to add color and texture to your home garden	Keeping a beautiful garden is welcoming and using native plants in visible areas helps the public adopt to this new aesthetic that benefits the world around