



Local Color

Native plants have their place, even in the 'burbs

If there is a time of year when I can cheerfully contemplate an all-native garden, spring is it. Foliage is abundant, fresh and varied, and a succession of stunningly beautiful flowers continues for many weeks. Alas, a lot of these spring-flowering plants go dormant in summer, while many other natives, if cultivated with a close approximation of natural Willamette Valley conditions with no supplemental water, turn brown in varying degrees. Just in time for that part of the year when we are eating on the patio and playing outside, with a close-up view of the yard.

From the point of view of the average suburban homeowner, there are several strikes against natives. One, they are not

sufficiently colorful. Two, they cannot offer as much variety as the amazing palette of garden plants drawn from all over the world. Three, very few are significantly deer resistant. If you value neatness, native plants can appear relatively untidy, too, compared with commercial varieties that have been carefully selected for a uniform, compact form. And with the welcome exception of osoberry, native plants get going distressingly late in spring. My garden has been blooming for close to two months before native wildflowers make an appearance.

My attitude to ecologically friendly home gardening is still evolving. I abandoned pesticides many decades ago. I have eliminated most known invasives from my yard and

diligently deadhead the others. I don't grow real water guzzlers and I've almost eliminated fall cleanup, to help preserve the healthy insect population that I believe is crucial to successful organic gardening. I actually like having weeds in my lawn. This year I resolved to continue my education by visiting a few private native plant gardens. So far I like what I'm seeing. It may not have an immediate impact on my plant selection, but at least I will learn more about the reasons real people make that choice and how it modifies the gardening routine.

There are almost as many reasons for gardening with natives as there are people who do it. Most of those I know are not purists. Take local naturalist Bruce Newhouse and his partner, Peg. They are among the most committed native gardeners I've met and can give no less than 18 reasons for their choice! But even they have, in addition to an apple tree they didn't plant, a flourishing *Daphne odora*. I visited their garden toward the end of March and found quite a few plants in bloom: flowering currant, trillium, fairy bells, bleeding heart, a little yellow-flowered mustard named barbarea and a very seductive fern-leaved lomatium.

Next to the trilliums, the most striking item was hound's tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*) which has blue, forget-me-not like flowers on stems that rise steadily over the blooming period. The shapely, upright leaves are a lovely gray-green with pink veins. Still to come are shooting stars, wild iris, Western columbine, larkspur and camas. I'll be returning later in the season to see

how the garden looks on Newhouse's regime (no water after 4th of July, he says) and also to discuss alternate approaches to watering (called "cheating") that can keep a native landscape reasonably green until September.

Incorporating a few star natives in a conventional flower garden is easy — just avoid putting them in areas with heavy summer irrigation. Some that are particularly intolerant of summer watering (or the high levels of fertility you may maintain in flower beds) can find a home in outlying areas or in beds reserved for natives. Woodland species will thrive in deciduous tree shade. A few sword ferns and a patch or two of low growing Oregon grape, plus a light mulch of chopped leaves and maybe a rock or two, can keep the area looking 'gardenized' after the ephemerals die down.

Finding native plants for purchase can be a challenge. Newhouse thinks the annual Wildflower Festival (May 20) and the fall Mushroom Festival at Mt. Pisgah Arboretum are your best bets. Both have plant sales that include a variety of native plants. While you are there, check the Native Plant Society of Oregon booth for three useful, inexpensive booklets on native trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants for the Willamette Valley. Contact NPSO for more information and to make friends with other native gardeners. The NPSO website (Emerald Chapter) also carries a list of plant sources, a list of invasive plants to be avoided and news about upcoming wildflower walks and talks. **EW**

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