Clean Waters

Starting in Your Home and Yard

Clean Waters *is a collaboration of the Connecticut Sea Grant Extension Program and the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System's NEMO Project, educating individuals about the impacts of everyday activities on water quality and simple techniques that help protect water resources from the home well to Long Island Sound.*

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Fact Sheet

June 2000

Going Native – Rethinking Plant Selection for the Home Landscape

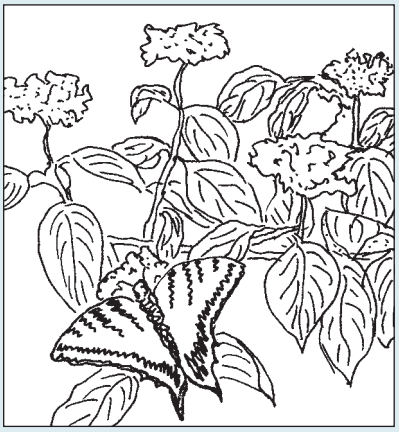
When the first European colonists arrived in what is now the United States, they brought from their homelands many plants and landscaping designs with which they were familiar and comfortable. Nearly three hundred and fifty years later, the American yard is still dominated by expansive lawns, symmetrically placed and shaped trees and shrubs, and flower beds of exotic plants typical of the English landscape tradition.

The native plants of North America have rarely been popular in American gardens. Early gardeners preferred the clipped yew hedges and tidy flower beds of Europe to the wild and untamed trees and flowers of nearby forests. However, native plants did have some supporters. Nearly a century and a half ago, while living on the shores of Walden Pond in eastern Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau came to know the forest and meadows, trees and herbs in all their seasonal moods. His writings celebrated the beauty of native plants and the natural landscape. Jens Jensen, a landscape designer from the northern Midwest, strove in his work to recreate the "tapestry of living colors" beheld by early pioneers in the region. He loved the native dogwoods, crabapples and hawthorns of the Midwest. His designs for public parks and private estates included many natural woodland landscapes utilizing native plants.

Despite such support, when an era of worldwide plant exploration blossomed in the late 1800's, exotic trees and shrubs from the far corners of the earth became featured attractions in American gardens and parks. In recent years, changes in taste and environmental awareness have led to some sharing of garden space by native species and exotic favorites of years past, but many of the most popular American landscaping plants still have their roots in distant countries.

WHAT ARE NATIVE PLANTS, NON-NATIVE PLANTS, AND WEEDS?

Native plants (also called indigenous plants) are plants that have evolved over hundreds or thousands of years in a particular region. They have adapted to the geography, hydrology and climate of the region and to the other species of plants and animals inhabiting the region. As a result, native plants are part of a community that provides habitat (food and shelter) for a variety of native wildlife species such as songbirds and butterflies. Native plants, when used in home landscaping, provide the ecological benefits of supporting local wildlife while requiring minimal maintenance due to their adaptation to local climate and soil conditions.



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Non-native plants (also called non-indigenous, invasive or exotic plants) are plants that have been introduced into an ecosystem in which they did not evolve. Some of these plants are introduced deliberately, as with our many exotic landscaping plants. Others are introduced accidentally, through the spread of seed by wildlife or by their inadvertent inclusion in seed mixes being sent from one area

of the world to another. Some of these introduced, non-native plant species do not grow well in their new environment or do not reproduce easily so they are easily controlled and pose no threat to the native ecosystem. Other introduced species find their new home much to their liking and reproduce prolifically, even in natural, minimally managed landscapes. These aggressive, or invasive plants often have no natural enemies or controls to limit their spread. Invasive non-native plant species can be a serious threat to native plants and communities, out-competing local species for available sunlight, water and nutrients, and do not provide the wildlife habitat benefits of the plants they replace.

Weeds are plants that are growing in places where they are not wanted. Both native and non-native plants can become weeds in a managed landscape like a garden or agricultural field. Non-native species tend to become invasive weeds in natural landscapes due to the lack of natural controls.

HOW CAN USING NATIVE PLANTS HELP THE ENVIRONMENT?

Landscaping with native plants has many positive factors that relate to conservation landscaping and to sustainable landscapes.

• Native plants save energy. Native plants have evolved and adapted to local conditions. They are vigorous and hardy, able to survive winter cold and summer heat. Once established, they require little or no irrigation or fertilization. They are resistant to local pests and diseases. Thus, native plants suit today's interest in "low-maintenance" gardening and landscaping.

• Native plants stay put. Native species are members of a community that includes other plants, animals and microorganisms. A natural balance keeps each species in check, allowing it to thrive in suitable conditions but preventing it from running amok. Native species rarely become invasive unless a

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Landscaping with Native Shrubs

Tim Fleury, Coordinator Forestry Stewardship Program

SHRUBS FOR DRY, SUNNY AREAS

Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*)
Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium augustifolium*)
Ground Juniper (*Juniperus communis*)
Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*)
Sweet Fern (*Comptonia peregrina*)

SHRUBS FOR MOIST SITES

Dogwoods (*Cornus spp.*)
Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*)
Highbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*)
Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*)
Pussy Willow (*Salix discolor*)
Shadbush Serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*)
Spirea (*Spirea latifolia*)
Swamp azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*)
Sweet Pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*)
Viburnums (*Viburnum spp.*)
Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)
Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

SHRUBS FOR SHADED SITES

Hazelnut (*Corylus americana, C. cornuta*)
Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*)
Swamp Azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*)
Viburnums (*V. acerfolium, V. cassinoides, V. alnifolium*)

WILDLIFE FOOD — SUMMER

Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)
Choke Cherry (*Prunus virginiana*)
Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra*)

WILDLIFE FOOD — FALL

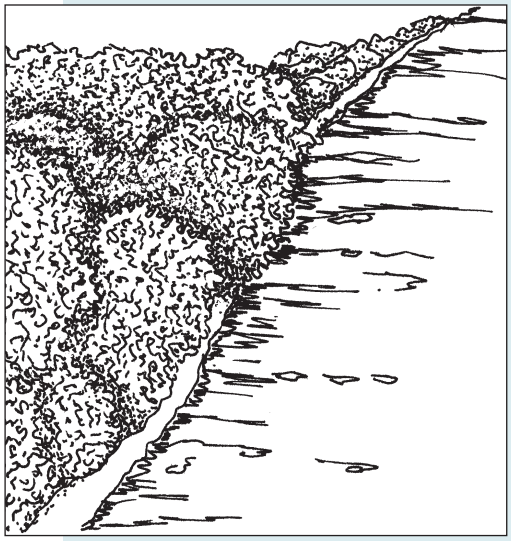
Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*)
Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis)*
Hawthorns (*Crataegus spp.*)
Hickories (*Carya spp.*)
Oaks (*Quercus spp.*)
Walnuts (*Juglans spp.*)

WILDLIFE COVER — WINTER

Atlantic White Cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*)
Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*)
Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*)
Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
Northern White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*)
White Pine (*Pinus strobus*)

major disturbance disrupts the natural balance of the community.

• Native plants support the local ecosystem. Native plants provide food and shelter for birds, butterflies and other desirable wildlife.



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• Native plants are interesting. The diversity of native plants includes interesting flowers and foliage. Native trees and shrubs provide a variety of heights, shapes, and textures in the landscape. Many provide winter interest with their bark or seedpods. Native plants also have historical and cultural interest. Some of these plants played a significant role in Native American culture or in European exploration and settlement of the continent. Many species have value as food or medicine. Others have been used for rope and twine, fabrics and dyes, and other domestic purposes. Native plants provide the people of today with a tangible link to the past.

HOW CAN I BEGIN LANDSCAPING WITH NATIVE PLANTS?

If you are planning a landscape on an undeveloped lot, first examine the existing plants to determine which habitat type you will be working within. Identify native trees and shrubs and see how many could be incorporated into your new landscape. Protecting existing native plants in a new landscape reduces the number of plants to be purchased and provides an instant "mature landscape". Also identify invasive species for removal to prevent future problems. In an existing landscape, replace plants that are lost to disease or storm damage with native species. Lists of native and invasive plant species, and books and pamphlets describing how to use them in home landscaping, are available from a number of sources, including the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, the University of Connecticut, and Connecticut College Arboretum. The brief list included on page 3 is only to spark your imagination.

As the natural landscape is developed, a general decline in both plant and wildlife habitat diversity occurs, leading to an overall decline in many species and a population explosion of "pest" species best suited to backyard living (including squirrels, house sparrows, and white-tailed deer). To help offset this loss, consider planting native trees, shrubs and perennials around your home and yard.

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Sea Grant Connecticut

The Connecticut Sea Grant College Program, based at the University of Connecticut, is part of a national network of university-based programs sponsoring coastal and marine-related research, outreach and education.

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