

GROW WILD!

Use Native Plants in Your Garden

by Karen Asher, RI Wild Plant Society

I give a presentation, “Ecosystem Gardening with Wildflowers,” across the state for libraries, land trusts, senior centers, and garden clubs, and the most frequently asked question is, “Why should I use native plants in my garden?”

For me, it’s a no brainer. Human activity like residential and commercial development has significantly diminished native plant habitat and led to species endangerment and loss. Excessive deer browsing has also contributed to reducing the number and variety of native plants. Our ecosystem is being thrown out of balance. The planting of non-native species that require huge amounts of water, fertilizer, herbicide, and pesticide compounds this. Some non-natives have escaped our gardens and invaded our woodlands and wetlands to become major invasive pests.

Native plants flourish in our gardens without the use of fertilizers and pesticides because they are adapted to the area. They are used to the winter and summer temperature fluctuations we have and have adapted to the amount of rainfall we get and to the soil PH in Rhode Island. In the wild nobody waters or fertilizes them and they are perfectly happy. Native plants thrive in their natural habitat without disrupting the ecology of the area. Plus, native plants are beautiful and many have a delicious scent.

The birds, butterflies and other wildlife in our area have adapted to the native plants. As the base of the food chain, they support all the wondrous creatures we enjoy seeing in our gardens. For example, the plants serve as food for caterpillars that later turn into butterflies.

The birds eat those caterpillars and then have the strength to migrate and raise their young. Birds use the plants for shelter, food, and cover. Wildlife flourishes amid native plants. Native plants can grow in a large variety of niche habitats: sunny meadows or shady woodlands, moist or wet conditions. Some are even deer resistant.

Avoid purchasing exotic species native to other continents, as these plants cannot sustain our native wildlife. Many of them lack the pests here that keep them in balance back home, so they become invasive thugs. These rapidly growing and reproducing plants displace native plants, adversely changing our environment.

Become knowledgeable about the native plants in our area. Join the RI Wild Plant Society (riwps.org). Visit the Garden in the Woods, a fabulous native plant garden in Massachusetts owned by the New England Wildflower Society (newfs.org). Excellent books to read are *Native Trees, Shrubs and Vines* and *Growing and Propagating Wildflowers* by William Cullina, and *Bringing Nature Home* by Douglas Tallamy.

The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society grows native plants for their spring plant sale, held the first Saturday in June from 9:00 am to noon at East Farm in Kingston. The sale features wildflowers, ferns, perennials, shrubs, pond plants, and much more, all grown by The Seed Starters, Plant Society members who enjoy plant propagation.

You can develop a firm sense of place by becoming attuned to the plants in our area. Knowledgeable naturalists feel at home in the forest — as they look around they feel surrounded by good friends. Get out of the house, away from the computer and the TV. Get to know the native plants in Rhode Island and use them in your garden to transform your landscape into a healthy habitat.