

Thought About Going Native?

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(Article published in *Gainesville Sun* on April 1, 2017)

When you think of a landscape “going native,” do you envision a weedy wild mess? The idea of planting natives is a good thing and how it looks depends on the homeowner. This article will give some of the benefits and misconceptions of planting natives in the landscape.

According to the Florida Native Plant Society, a “Florida native plant” refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact. They include species that are considered indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

As Florida becomes more populated and developed, native plants are removed from their environment or displaced due to non-native invasive plants taking over, including plants such as Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*), and coral ardisia (*Ardisia crenata*). Although there is a trend to use more natives in the landscape, they still tend to be underutilized in commercial and residential landscapes.

There are significant benefits to planting natives. Since the wildlife evolved with the native plants, the plants provide food and shelter for native wildlife. Florida ranks seventh in the United States in biodiversity, meaning we have a lot of different animals out there. By planting native plants, you increase the number of birds, butterflies, pollinators and other wildlife visiting your landscape that need those plants to thrive.

The best way to do that is to plant a diverse number of plants in vertical layers. By using a variety of plants, it creates more opportunities for wildlife as well as seasonal interest and less noticeable pest and disease damage. When it comes to pests, many birds and lizards eat insects, so by eliminating all insects in the garden, you remove their food source.

Since native species are adapted to the region, they may have more drought tolerance and pest resistance and require little to no fertilizer. Unfortunately, that premise cannot be guaranteed since many homes are built on “fill dirt,” which is often depleted of nutrients and high in pH. This is far from a natural state.

Native plants should be selected based on choosing the right plant for the right place since even a native plant can struggle or die if it is environmentally stressed. Native plants also require the same amount of water in order to be established. If you can establish it and built a strong root system, it will be a healthier plant.

If you go to most nurseries, you will often see beautiful cultivated varieties and hybrids that are often not native. These plants tend to be more popular because there is a lot of money that goes into developing and marketing these plants to appeal to the consumer.

Many native plants are beautiful, but the production of natives is more limited. This is due to several factors. First, the market is more regionalized than for non-native plants. The locally-owned nurseries that grow native plants are typically relatively small and have smaller quantities of plants and even smaller budgets to advertise. Due to their smaller size, it creates higher costs, so the plants are often more expensive.

One opportunity to shop for native plants is at the Native Plant Sale that occurs every spring and fall at Morningside Nature Center in Gainesville. The spring sale will be held on April 14 from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. for members of the Friends of Nature Parks and the Florida Native Plant Society, which is easy to join, or on April 15 from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for the public. It will feature thousands of native shrubs, trees, wildflowers, ferns, grasses and vines from local nurseries. There will be several educational booths as well, including my Master Gardeners.

If you need some more time to plan your garden and some education on choosing, planting and maintaining them, I am conducting a Right Plant, Right Place workshop on April 15 from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30p.m. at the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County office. The cost is \$15 and you can register on Eventbrite at <http://tinyurl.com/jh68xja> or call 955-2402. It includes the 100-page Florida-Friendly Landscaping Guide to Plant Selection and Landscape Design.

For help selecting native plants, visit <http://floridayards.org/fyplants> or <http://www.fnps.org/plants> for an easy-to-use plant database. If you just start with a few natives or you really want to go native, the environment will thank you.