

Gardening with Native Plants

Plants that grow in the specific habitats in which they evolved are called native plants. This can be viewed from a rather broad scale, such as the Northern or Southern Hemisphere, to a smaller scale, such as North America or Europe, or to an even smaller scale, such as Wisconsin or Alaska. In fact, Wisconsin can be broken down even smaller yet into northern, central, and southern zones or even by county.

The point is some plants require very specific growing conditions and are limited to a specific area, trilliums for example, while others are less demanding and will establish themselves in a wide range of conditions, such as the Silver Maple. Therefore, when selecting plants for your garden, do some research into which plants will prosper in your area.

What are the conditions that play a role in where a plant thrives? Soil type, minimum / maximum temperatures and annual rainfall are the three major factors. Without going into too much detail, a plant that grows well in sand will probably not do well in heavy clay, a plant that needs constant warm temperatures will not survive in northern Wisconsin, and you're not going to find a cactus growing in the swamps of Florida.

Keeping all this in mind, why go through the trouble of searching out natives for your garden? It's simple finding the plants that are native to your area not only creates a beautiful, natural garden but also limits the amount of labor required to keep them looking their best. There is no major soil work needed. No adding of endless amendments to create a certain growing condition. No hassles of covering your plants during cold weather, less time watering or creating drainage from areas. Plus, natives also possess natural pest resistance, meaning less spraying of toxic chemicals. In other words, these plants know how to care for themselves.

To get you started, here is a small example of some native Wisconsin plants. Native Wisconsin woodland plants include Trillium, Jack-in-the-pulpit, Dutchman's Breeches, Marsh Blue and Birds, Foot Violet, Bloodroot, Mayapple, Lady and Cinnamon Ferns, Trout Lily, Shooting Star, Marsh Marigold and more. Native Wisconsin prairie / meadow plants include Butterfly Weed, Sky Blue Aster, Purple Coneflower, Meadowsweet, Joe-Pye Weed, Little and Big Bluestem grasses, Showy Sunflower, Prairie Blazing Star, Cardinal Flower, Wild Bergamont (Bee Balm), Cup Plant, Compass Plant, Prairie Dock, Goldenrod and more. Native Wisconsin trees and shrubs include Red and Sugar Maples, Red and Bur Oaks, Red and White Pines, White Birch, Shagbark Hickory, Grey Dogwood, Witch Hazel, Staghorn and Smooth Sumac, Pussy Willow, American Cranberry and more. Check with your local garden center or the U.W. Extension for a more comprehensive list.

If you're looking to create a naturally beautiful garden with little maintenance, then you need to check out natives. As our lives get busier by the day, our gardens don't have to suffer. Plant natives and let them do their thing. You won't be disappointed. By the way, be prepared to receive plenty of compliments on your gardens and plants, and it's up to you if you want to share the secret.