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Native Plants & Your Schoolyard Habitats® Site



Dear Educator,

Thank you for your interest in the Schoolyard Habitats Program. The National Wildlife Federation strongly encourages all of those adding new plantings to the landscape to choose only native plants. Please read on to learn why native plants will benefit wildlife and the wider school community.

What are native plants?

A native plant is one that naturally occurs on a site and has not been introduced from another far-off place. Plants referred to as “natives” to the U.S. are those which we are reasonably sure shaded the streams or reached for the sun in the forests or meadows, prairies or deserts, of our local areas at the time of European colonization.

Why should we choose native plants?

Native plants will thrive in their natural site without disrupting natural ecological processes because they are best suited to the conditions of that site. Wildlife in your area has evolved to use native plants as food, cover, shelter, and sometimes even for water, and natives provide the best diversity of habitat elements for wildlife.

The wildlife in our communities flourish amid locally native plants. Unfortunately, our choices at garden centers are complicated by the many hundreds of species of exotic plants which are widely available for sale. Exotic plants, though originally from Asia, Europe, Africa, or Australia, now cover thousands of home landscapes across North America. These plants cannot sustain the wildlife with which we share our communities. Though these plants may offer birds fruit, squirrels nuts, and hummingbirds and butterflies nectar, they do not provide the entire range of seasonal habitat benefits that an appropriate locally native species will provide. If we want not only to satisfy our desires to attract wildlife, but also to restore the critical, often unseen small pieces in our ecosystems, we need to bring back our locally native plants.

These plants meet the food and cover needs of all wildlife species: bees, wasps and butterflies, flies and grasshoppers, bugs, beetles and spiders and thousands of others that sustain and support food webs which songbirds and chipmunks, salamanders and bats, toads and box turtles more visibly demonstrate. At the bottom of the food web, native plants far outperform the exotic plants that have characterized traditional landscaping for much of the past century. Native species also provide excellent cover for wildlife, require no fertilization and once established, do not require watering.

An equally important reason to use locally native plants is to lessen the possibility that exotic plants from our landscapes will run wild. Generally, native plants do not become invasive; that is, they will not reproduce rampantly, invading and impoverishing the diversity of our remaining natural habitats as an increasing number of exotic plants now do. Non-native plants often reproduce quickly, invading and impoverishing the diversity of our remaining natural habitats. When a non-native species is planted in a new place, it is isolated from its original habitat that includes natural insect and disease controls. This lack of controls allow the plant species to spread unchecked in its new environment.

Rapidly growing and reproducing non-natives may often displace native plants that are not adapted to compete with invading exotic plants. Animals that depend on native plants to provide a particular habitat component may not find a suitable replacement in the non-native species. Exotic plants that have been popular in gardens but which have been particularly invasive in many parts of the U.S. (and therefore should not be planted!) include: purple loosestrife, multiflora and Cherokee roses, Asiatic bush honeysuckle, Japanese honeysuckle, autumn and Russian olive, and burning bush euonymus, among others.

There are locally native plant species which meet virtually any landscaping need, while replacing the monotony of the few exotics that so dominate our landscapes and the spread of the exotic invasives which are choking out our diversity of local plants in woodlands, roadsides and meadows.

Our landscapes, carefully planted with locally native species, can be effective instruments in restoring native plants to our communities and open spaces. Birds will carry the seeds of our natives into wild spaces, reversing the trend of birds carrying seeds of exotics from gardens out into the natural environment.

How do students benefit?

Limiting plant selections to locally native plants will introduce a whole new set of concepts to students. Students benefit by becoming attuned to the plants and animals of their particular region and ecosystem, developing a firmer sense of place. Concepts of change, competition, seed dispersal, and geography all come to life as students learn about exotic and invasive plants. Issues in the news, such as national parks and many nature preserves' efforts to remove invasive species from their lands, also take on a new relevancy. Students also benefit from knowing that they are not only helping to provide high quality habitat for wildlife through planting natives, but they are also improving the overall quality of their local ecosystem.

Where are native plants available for sale?

Most local nurseries and plant centers sell native plants, whether they know it or not. Some are also willing to special-order plants that they do not normally stock. If possible, request your plants by species name rather than common name, as one common name is often ascribed to many different species. The best sources of finding reputable native plant suppliers is your state native plant or wildflower society.

Where can more information about native plants be found?

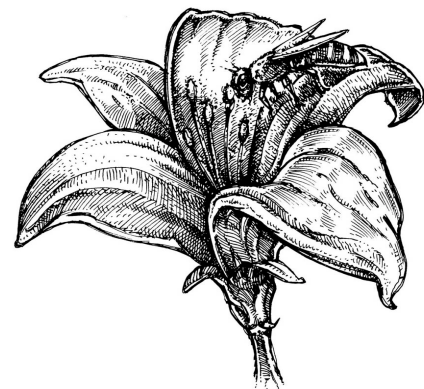
-The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (www.wildflower.org) This site includes extensive links, state-by-state native plant lists, and links to state and local native plant societies.

-Wild Ones, Ltd. (www.for-wild.org)

-Native Plant Conservation Initiative (www.nps.gov/plants)

Remember, choosing native plants will:

- provide the best overall food sources for wildlife
- require less water and overall maintenance
- support 10 to 50 times as many species of native wildlife as non-native plants
- help maintain the diversity of plant species in our communities
- educate students about high-quality restoration work



Illustrations by Ted Walke

For more information about the National Wildlife Federation's Schoolyard Habitats Program, visit www.nwf.org/habitats/schoolyard or call 1-800-247-7387