



Native or Introduced

What Do These Terms Mean and Why Are They Important?

A Fact Sheet from the Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center

One definition given for the word “native” in Webster’s Dictionary is “growing, living, or produced originally in a certain place”. Using this definition, a native plant would be a plant that was originally growing in a certain place. Sounds easy enough. However, how do you classify “originally” and what “certain place” are we talking about? In actual practice, the definition of a native plant is somewhat amorphous and often depends largely on the interpretation of the person doing the defining.

The most commonly used definition of a native plant is one that is considered to have been present in a specific region of the country, or often simply in the United States, prior to European settlement. The reason for considering immigration or migration of these settlers as the cut off date is that when settlers arrived, they brought their plants along with them. Note that this definition does not take into account the actions of Native Americans who also moved plants about freely.

A major complication encountered when using this timeline when attempting to define a native plant is that we really do not have accurate records to tell us which plants were here and which were not before European colonization. However, we do have a good idea of which plants were specifically brought into the United States for various uses (and where they came from), as well as most of the weeds that came here by accident. Therefore, in practical application, a plant is usually

considered to be native if we know that it was not brought into this country. Other terms that may also be used when referring to a native plant are indigenous, aboriginal, or endemic.

Plant species that originated from another part of the world are called introduced, exotic, or alien. Most of our agronomic crops, forage and lawn grasses, cover crops, and many other conservation plants were introduced into the United States. The vast majority of these plants are not invasive, which means they are not prone to spread by seed or vegetative means into areas in which they were not planted. However, we can all think of ones that are. (Can you say “Kudzu”?) There are also numerous instances where native species have become invasive, as many of you can attest to seeing broomsedge and goldenrod, both native to Mississippi, invading CRP fields and abandoned pastures.

Some highly invasive species have been legally classified at the federal and/or state level as noxious weeds and sale and transportation of these plants is prohibited within the designated area. The current listing of federal noxious weeds, as well as provisions of the noxious weed act itself, can be viewed on-line at the APHIS noxious weeds home page (<http://aphis.usda.gov/ppq/weeds/>) or the PLANTS database (<http://plants.usda.gov>).

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**This Fact Sheet
is the first of a
series of technical
information on
plant materials and
their role in the
conservation of our
natural resources.**

Top Five Invasive Introduced Species

- **Privet**
- **Cogongrass**
- **Kudzu**
- **Chinese tallow**
- **Johnsongrass**



On February 3, 1999, President Clinton signed an executive order dealing with the introduction and spread of invasive species. This order was developed to address the enormous economic damage that invasive species have caused in the United States. Key elements of the order call for federal agencies, whenever practical and lawful, to prevent the spread of and determine control methods for invasive introduced species. There is also a provision to restrict the authorization and funding of activities that promote the spread of invasive species.

The Executive Order more narrowly defines a native species as one that is native to a particular ecosystem. Therefore, moving a plant from a stream bank to a hillside could constitute an introduction into a different ecosystem. Information is not currently available to allow us to break plant ranges down to the ecosystem level, largely because the boundaries of ecosystems themselves have not been clearly determined. Although it is not feasible for conservationists to discourage the use of all introduced species, we can suggest that land users not plant a known invasive introduced plant such as those mentioned in the list below.

We can also promote the planting of native species where appropriate. A growing emphasis on using native plants has been demonstrated in many areas and is especially noticeable in conservation

programs (e.g. WHIP, CRP, etc.). The Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center is currently collecting, evaluating, and selecting native plants to increase a land user's planting options.

This trend is not going to change, because although several commonly used introduced plants may not be invasive, some are causing more subtle damages to the environment. Deleterious effects on soil structure and microorganisms, insect and wildlife populations, and water quality and quantity are more difficult to quantify, but have been demonstrated to be due to the introduction of certain plants into various ecosystems. For these reasons, it is becoming more and more important to guarantee that populations of our native plants flourish.

The following table is not intended to be a complete listing of native and introduced plants but it does present some of the more common species within the state. The PLANTS database can be used to determine if a plant is native or introduced into the United States. For best results, search by scientific plant name not by common name because common names are so variable. Scientific names for plants of interest can be found in numerous references, including the Mississippi Planting Guide.

Introduced and Native Plant Species Found in Mississippi		
Invasive Introduced Species	Common Introduced Species	Native Species
Kudzu	Bahiagrass (common varieties)	Switchgrass
Cogongrass	Bermudagrass	Big bluestem
Purple loosestrife	Sericea and bicolor lespedeza	Partridge pea
Purple nutsedge	Most commonly used clovers	Maidencane
Tropical soda apple	Annual and perennial ryegrass	Eastern gamagrass
Alligatorweed	Tall fescue	Pecan
Pickerelweed	Johnsongrass	Common and giant ragweed
Privet	Sweet potatoes	Little bluestem
Curly dock	Grain sorghum	Indiangrass
Autumn olive	Soybeans	Red cedar
Red rice	Alfalfa	
Water hyacinth	Hairy vetch	
Japanese honeysuckle	Small grains (wheat, oats, rye)	

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