

Delaware Nature Society

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What is a native plant?

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What is a Native Plant?

We all know that it is important to use native plants in our gardens because they are beautiful, disease resistant and resilient. You may also be aware of the symbiosis native plants have with other living organisms such as birds, mammals, insects and beneficial soil bacteria. But just what is a native plant?

Although it seems simple, this is a topic of great debate among scientists and horticulturalists. Since nature is constantly changing, the two key variables in the argument come down to geographic scale and when we take the snapshot. In general, the time frame often used is defined as prior to European settlement. But what about the question of geographic region? Should we look at plants statewide, by physiographic province, habitat, watershed, or specific property? In applying these variables to your home garden, a simple answer is that native plants are the plants that grew on your property prior to European settlement.

How native should you go?

We are very fortunate to have an accepted list of plants considered native to Delaware prior to European settlement*. Ecologists rely on these lists for habitat restoration projects, and often narrow their list to plants that are native to a very small geographic area. However, there are some very good reasons for the typical homeowner to include plants in the *garden* that are native to the wider geographic region. For example:

- **Site conditions:** It is generally accepted that prior to European settlement, most of Delaware was old growth forest, salt marsh, or meadow. Few of us have these conditions in our yards today; therefore we need to consider a greater diversity of native plants that will thrive in our backyard gardens.
- **Species diversity, genetic diversity and climate change:** We all know that having a diversity of species is good for the health of our gardens. Having greater species and genetic diversity will also bolster your garden's ability to evolve over time as the climate or other conditions change.
- **Hydrology and soil changes due to development practices:** Many of us have compacted and thin soils as a result of prior agricultural practices and/or heavy equipment during the development process. Natural springs have been capped, wetlands filled, and streams piped to accommodate development, and as a result, some homes downstream are now being flooded.
- **Land management practices:** Native Americans managed land for open meadows and we do a similar thing in a garden setting. In fact, most yard maintenance practices are better suited to perpetuating a prairie than our native forest. It only makes sense that many prairie plants thrive in our gardens.
- **Individual needs and issues:** Site specific issues such as slopes, or homeowner needs such as privacy or a safe environment for small children may also affect your choice of plants.

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For these reasons, many people advocate taking a regional approach to plant nativity in the home garden. This region straddles two physiographic provinces, the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain. In addition, we are located just far enough north to be the southern limit of many northern plant species, and just far enough south to be the northern limit of many southern species. As a result, we are blessed with an abundance of native plants from which to choose for our gardens. In this catalog, the Delaware Nature Society offers plants native to the Coastal Plain and Piedmont provinces, as well as a few excellent garden plants more likely to be found on the prairies of the mid-west. Planted in the right spot, all of these plants are great for your garden.

What about cultivars?

A cultivar is a cultivated variety identified by “Quote” marks. It may be a seed strain that is selected to exhibit particular traits such as flower color, plant size, cold tolerance or disease resistance. It may be a hybrid or crossing of two or more species. Many cultivars are also clones, vegetatively propagated through cuttings or tissue culture to be genetically identical. However, not all cultivars are clones, and many plants that are not cultivars may also be vegetatively propagated.

Habitat restoration specialists avoid clones by collecting seed from native plants growing within a few miles of the site to be restored; thereby, creating a diverse, non-clonal environment. In these situations, where the site is being restored to original conditions and hydrology, it is important to use local seed-grown plants. However, in your garden there might not be room for a towering 7-foot tall Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium*), but the 4-foot “Little Joe” might work instead. Or perhaps you want to extend the bloom and butterfly season by adding several other varieties of Joe Pye Weed. Ultimately, it is important to consider your individual and site-specific needs when deciding which plants to choose.

Congratulations! Now you know the basics about choosing native plants. You can relax and enjoy your new plants, confident that you are doing your part to help repair the planet. Happy gardening!

*The Flora of Delaware: An Annotated Checklist, William A. McAvoy and Karen Bennett