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Bringing Nature Back – One Yard at a Time

The Best Native Plants for the New York Area

There is much debate these days about Native plants and their use in our home landscapes. While many of us feel that Native Plants are not only necessary, but imperative in our yards to the exclusion of exotic species, there are many more of us who feel that Native plants are messy, unsightly, and unruly. In truth, both factions are correct - to a certain extent.

Native plants in our suburban landscapes are necessary to keep our local ecosystems and food webs healthy. However, some native plant species can be unruly which works in a meadow environment, but not in a small yard. By choosing wisely, a Gardener or Landscaper can provide both the habitat that wildlife needs to survive, and an esthetically pleasing yard. The plants listed below are some of the best plants and cultivars, both ecologically and esthetically, that we can put into our gardens. But before we begin, a few thoughts are necessary.

A healthy yard that is in balance has only 3-6% damage to its plants. Most gardeners don't notice the damage and reach for the pesticide until 10% damage is reached. Most non-specific pesticides will kill off most of the other insects, too, including the good guys. And usually, by the time the damage is noticeable, the pest insect is already being eaten or parasitized by the good guys (aka Beneficial insects) This is not desirable. Add to this, the fact that 96% of our local songbirds feed insects to their young, and we've just killed off a major food source for them. Think of it as their jobs to keep our yards reasonably insect-free. When we leave them alone to do their job, they do it very well!

Native plants and native animals co-evolved. This means that they tend to be in balance with each other because they've spent eons developing defense mechanisms to fight each other. When we import plants from other countries, we don't bring in the organisms that keep them in balance and our wildlife does not always find them palatable enough to keep them in check. Or we DO accidentally bring in the things that keep them in balance, but our Native plants are not able to fight these organisms, because they did not spend eons getting used to them. And sometimes, the plants we import become invasive and take over. Dutch Elm disease, Asian Beetles, Emerald Pine Borers, Japanese Knotweed, and Mugwort are a few examples of non-native species out-competing our native plants and animals.

One last consideration: Plants were intended by the natural world to start the food web. If we don't have holes in some of our leaves, there's something very wrong in our yards. It's time to shift the American gardening paradigm to something more sensible and sustainable.

The Best Native Trees and Shrubs for the Northeast

North American Oaks - *Quercus alba* (White), *macrocarpa* (Burr); *stellata* (Post); *rubra* (Red); *velutina* (Black); *Q pallustris* (Pin); *Q coccinea* (Scarlet) and others.

Most oaks grow to a height of 40-80 feet tall at maturity, which can take decades. Growth is moderate. At 10 years of age, most oaks will be 20-30 feet tall. Oaks have attractive bark and lobed green leaves and red fall color. They are the #1 wildlife tree in the Northeast. In spring, their bloom-time and leaf-out coincides with warbler migration, which means many hungry birds keeping the caterpillar population in check. Acorns provide both birds and other wildlife plenty of fall and winter food. The leaves help to keep the soil acid and feed the soil microbes as they break down. Full Sun – evenly moist, well-drained soil

Black, Bird (Pin), and Choke Cherries – *Punus serotina*, *pennsylvanica*, and *virginiana*

Black Cherries grow large slowly to 40-60 feet. Pin Cherries grow quickly but do not live as long (20-30 years) Choke Cherries are a small tree to 16 feet. All produce spring flowers which pollinators nectar on, and small cherries that birds eat in summertime. They also produce many caterpillars for birds and other animals to feed to their offspring. Sun to part shade – evenly moist well-drained soil

Grey, Black, and River Birch – *Betula populifolia*, *lenta*, and *nigra* - Birch trees are medium height trees and are attractive especially when plated in groups. All have serrated leaves and yellow fall color. The bark is particularly attractive. They produce caterpillars for wildlife to eat and the seeds are enjoyed by chickadees, redpolls, and other small songbirds. 15'-40'. Sun to part shade – moist well-drained to wet soil

American Beech – *Fagus grandifolia* - Beech grow slowly to 50 - 80 feet. They have smooth silvery bark and branching starts low to the ground. They produce many species of caterpillars and other insects for birds to feed to their offspring. They also produce nutlets that are attractive to many types of wildlife. Sun to part shade – moist well-drained soil

White Spruce – *Picea glauca* (White Spruce) White Spruce is an attractive pyramidal evergreen tree of moderate height. There are many cultivars available in all shapes and sizes. Its cones produce seeds for many species of birds and mammals. It is also a good tree for shelter, protection and building nests in. It also provides insects in both summer and winter. 3’-60’ (cultivar dependant). Full Sun - evenly moist well-drained soil

Winterberry Holly, and Inkberry – *Ilex verticellata* and *glabra* - Winterberry Holly is an attractive large shrub or small tree to 15’. It drops its leaves in fall but the red berries on female plants persist through winter, unless a flock of Waxwings or Robins finds them. Inkberry provides cover year-round since it’s evergreen. Birds and other wildlife are not as fond of the berries but will eat them as winter progresses. They typically grow to 8’. Both are excellent nectar sources for pollinators in spring and a decent source of insect protein during the summer. To insure berries, make sure male and female plants are purchased. Only one male is necessary for quite a few females. Both species take sun to part shade and moist well-drained soil. Winterberry also tolerates wet soil.

The Dogwoods – Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus Florida*) Pagoda Dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*) and Red-Twig/Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus sericea* aka *stolonifera*) Grey Dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*)

Flowering and Pagoda Dogwoods are small trees to 20 feet tall. Flowering Dogwood has large attractive white or pink Spring flowers and bright red fall berries loved by birds. Pagoda (Alternate-leafed) Dogwood has clusters of tiny blooms loved by bees and other pollinators and fall berries which birds and other wildlife find very attractive. Red-Twig and Grey Dogwood are shrubs that grow 4-12 feet tall and wide. Both have striking bright red stems in winter and white berries that birds enjoy. They offer good cover and nesting sites and are a good pollinator nectar source when in bloom. All dogwoods are Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained soil, Red-Twig tolerates wet soil

American Red Cedar – *Juniperus virginiana* – Red Cedar has an upright pyramidal habit and shaggy reddish bark when mature. It grows to 25-50 feet on average. It has evergreen scales and short needles which are very aromatic. The female plants have juicy berry-like cones that waxwings and other birds and wildlife devour, and the tree provides excellent cover and nesting sites. Sun to light shade - Well-drained soil

Highbush and Lowbush Blueberries – *Vaccinium corymbosum* (Highbush) and *angustifolium* (Lowbush) – Blueberries have small glossy oval leaves and waxy white bells that bees love. The flowers are followed by summer fruit that everybody loves, including people. Highbush grow to 6-10 feet and Lowbush rarely grow taller than 2 feet. Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained to wet acidic soil

These trees and shrubs were chosen for their high wildlife value and excellent landscape usage. All were chosen as dual-purpose, both attractive and extremely valuable environmentally. There are many others that are almost as excellent both visually and environmentally. Sadly, there’s not enough room for them here. Eventually, I’ll finish the book...

The Best Native Perennials, Annuals, and Grasses for the Northeast

The Goldenrods – *Solidago caesia*, *flexicaulis*, *rigida*, *rugosa*, *sphacelata*, and *speciosa* -Most goldenrods tend to be invasive, but there is no better native perennial for wildlife. They generate lots of insect protein for birds, and the blooms attract many species of pollinators, plus many species’ seeds are eaten by birds and small mammals. *Caesia* and *flexicaulis* are not invasive and are for shadier areas. The others can be kept in control by planting in a bottomless container dug into the ground with the lip above the soil line. 2-4’ Sun to part shade – Well-drained to dry soil

New York and New England Asters – *Aster (Symphyotrichum) novi-belgii* and *novae angliae*- Native asters are a great nectar source for late summer. Finches and other small songbirds also enjoy the seeds and there are many insects that use it as a larval food source. 2-5’ Full Sun – Moist well-drained soil

Switchgrass – *Panicum virgatum* - Panic or Switch grass offers good cover and nesting sites for grassland birds. The seeds are eaten by birds and small mammals, and many butterfly and moth larvae plus grasshoppers eat the leaves This is not usually a problem because most birds and many mammals, including foxes eat the insects that eat the grass 3-6’. Sun to light shade – Well-drained wet to dry soil – tolerates flooding

Purple Coneflowers – *Echinacea purpurea* and *pallida* – Although not considered native to Long Island, these are very high in habitat and wildlife value, so I’ve included them. Pretty blooms in late summer with interesting seedheads that Goldfinches and other birds love, plus the flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators and the leaves are host to quite a few insects...what more could you ask for? 18” – 4’. Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained to dry soil

The Sunflowers – *Helianthus annuus*, *angustifolius*, *divaricatus* and *tuberosus*

That's right, the sunflowers we feed the birds and eat ourselves are native! Small to giant golden disc that bees and butterflies enjoy turn into seeds that the birds love. And the annual ones are easy to grow from seed. If you plant cultivars, just make sure they are the old-fashioned ones that are fertile, not the new sterile cultivars. If it says "pollenless" it's not much use for wildlife. And be advised, some of the perennial ones can take over the garden if you let them. 3-12'. Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained soil

Pyeweed, Boneset, Perennial Ageratum and their cultivars – *Eupatorium/Eutrochium*/, *dubium*, *fistulosum*, *maculatum*, *perfoliatum*, *purpureum* and *Conoclinium coelestinum*

Pyeweed has white to lilac fuzzy-topped clusters of blooms that bees and other beneficial insects love, and the leaves are used by quite a few insects, too. During winter, chickadees and woodpeckers pick at the hollow stems looking for insects. 18" -6' Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained to wet soil

Black-eyed Susans – *Rudbeckia fulgida*, *hirta* (annual), *laciniata* and *triloba*

Black-eyed Susans attract insects to their leaves and sunny golden blooms (*R. hirta* has many cultivars in yellow, orange, and red blooms) and birds for their seeds. 1'-6'. Sun to part shade–well-drained soil, some tolerate extremes

Tickseeds – *Coreopsis lanceolata* (Lance-leaf), *verticillata* (Threadleaf) and *grandiflora* (Large Flower)-

Named for the shape and size of their seeds, not because they attract ticks, Tickseeds are long-blooming yellow, orange and red daisy-like blooms. The foliage on *verticillata* is feathery and the others are more lance-like. Beneficial insects love the flowers and birds enjoy the seeds. 8"-24" Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained to dry soil

Coral Bells – *Heuchera americana* and *villosa* Coral Bells have very attractive leaves in many shades of silvers, purples, yellows, and oranges. Hummingbirds and pollinating insects enjoy the blooms and arthropods hide under the leaves in wooded environs. 8-12" Part to full shade – Moist well-drained soil

Milkweeds and Butterflyweed – *Asclepias incarnata*, *verticillata*, *syriaca*, and *tuberosa* -White to lavender

or gold to orange clusters of blooms. Most important plant for the Monarch butterfly, whose caterpillars rely on the leaves for food. Pollinators nectar on the blooms. *Tuberosa*, 2' and *verticillata* 3-4', prefer sun and drier soils, *incarnata*, 3.5' prefers sun to part shade and moist soils. *Syriaca* can become invasive.

Virginia and Blue Wild Rye – *Elymus (Leymus) virginiana*, and *glauca* These two wild ryes are attractive

clumping grasses with nodding seedheads that birds and small mammals love. Grasshoppers, caterpillars and other insects use the leaves and field birds will nest in larger clumps. 3'-4'. Full Sun (*glauca* tolerates light shade) – Well-drained soil

Bee Balm and Bergamot – *Monarda bradburiana*, *didyma*, and *fistulosa* Bee balms have aromatic leaves and

upright clusters of tubular blooms in shades of pinks, red, and purples which hummingbirds and bees love but deer don't. 2'-4'. Sun to part shade – Evenly moist well-drained soil the leaves and field birds will nest in larger clumps. 3'-4'. Full Sun (*glauca* tolerates light shade) – Well-drained soil

Blazing Star – *Liatris spicata* Blazing Star is a wonderful native perennial whose purple spikes of bloom attract bees and other

beneficial insects. Birds enjoy the seeds and the stalk attracts woodpeckers and other insect-eaters in fall and winter if left on the plant. 2'-4'. Sun to part shade – Evenly moist well-drained soil – tolerates flooding

Little Bluestem – *Schizachyrium scoparium* Little Bluestem is a very attractive clumping native grass with narrow blue-

green blades and an upright habit. In fall, it turns reddish gold and the color persists throughout winter. It's a good butterfly and moth host plant and other insects enjoy it, too. Grassland birds like the seeds and nest in larger clumps. 2'-3'. Sun to part shade – Evenly moist well-drained soil

Once again, there are many other perennials which are both attractive and productive environmentally. I personally believe that they don't have to be native to the local area as long as the ecosystem services they provide are high. My basic rule of thumb is: If the insects are using both the blooms for nectar and the leaves for food and something bigger, like a bird or mammal, is eating the seeds or berries then it's working, ecologically, to feed the base of the food chain – which feeds the rest of the food chain. And again, leaves are *supposed* to have a few holes in them. A balanced yard will have enough predators to keep the pest insects in check. You may have an occasional outbreak of aphids or such but some other critter will come along after a week or two and pick them off.

In addition, Climate Change is forcing plants to move faster than they are able to. It will be gardeners who will help them move fast enough in the coming decades. I also feel that many cultivars provide similar ecosystem services to straight species, though there are some which do not. Caution is needed when using cultivars, to make sure that there is pollen and nectar being produced and that insects are using the leaves.

The Best Native Groundcovers and Vines for the Northeast

Carex pennsylvanica – Pennsylvania Sedge This particular arching bright green sedge is being used as a mown or mow-less turf alternative for shade. It's used as a host plant for many butterflies and moths, plus other insects like it too, as do birds for nesting and the seeds it produces. 10". Part shade – Moist well-drained to wet soil

Labrador and Bird-foot Violets – *Viola labradorica* and *pedata* Violets are attractive ground covers. Labrador has heart-shaped purple leaves and Bird Foot looks like...you guessed it-a bird's foot. Both have fragrant flowers which are also edible. Many insects use the leaves but the most important are the fritillaries. Birds and small mammals enjoy the seeds 3"-6". Part Shade – Moist well-drained soil

Trumpet Honeysuckle – *Lonicera sempervirens* - Trumpet Honeysuckles are wonderful semi-evergreen vines with slender tubular blooms in shades of yellow, gold, orange and scarlet which are beloved by hummingbirds and have multiple flushes of bloom throughout the summer. The berries are eaten by many types of small wildlife. 8-12'. Sun to part shade – Well-drained soil

Bearberry – *Arctostaphylos uva ursi* Bearberry is a wonderful evergreen native groundcover which is great for dry dappled shade. The waxy white bells attract bees and the berries attract many species of birds and mammals, even bears! Sun to part shade – Moist well-drained to dry soil

Virginia Creeper – *Parthenocissus quinquefolia* Virginia Creeper is a fantastic native vine with deep purple fall berries, produced just in time for migrating birds, and fabulous bright red fall color. It's host to quite a few butterflies and moths and is a good nesting spot for many songbird. 20'-30'. Sun to Full Shade – Moist well-drained to wet soil

Moss and other low Phloxes – *Phlox subulata*, *divaricata* and *stolonifera* The groundcover phloxes are creeping mounding blankets of green. *Subulata* is evergreen. In early spring they provide nectar for the early pollinators with their blooms in shades of white, pink, rose, blue and purple, and because of their ground-hugging habit, they are good hiding spots for many types of arthropods. Garden Phlox, another native, is a much taller version with similar flowers but since creeping phlox provides more wildlife value, I chose them instead. 2"-6" Part Shade – Evenly moist well-drained soil

Foamflower – *Tiarella cordifolia* - Foamflowers are similar to Coral Bells with deeply veined foliage and a silvery sheen to the leaves. The spike of flowers look like little bottle brushes in shades of creams and pinks. Hummingbirds and pollinators enjoy the blooms in spring and many insects hide in the low mat of leaves. 4"-8" Part to full shade - Moist well-drained to wet soil

There's a bit of room left. I was going to add more plants, but I couldn't decide who would make the cut and who wouldn't, so I'm leaving it up to the readers to find more of their favorite natives by giving a few, very good Native Plant reference websites. When used together, they make a great reference guide. Also, "Bringing Nature Home", by Doug Tallamy; "The Living Landscape" by Doug Tallamy and Rick Darke are great book to explain why we need natives and which plants work for the southern part of NY State. "Native Plants of the Northeast" by Donald Leopold is an excellent reference of natives in NY State including upstate. Finally, "Planting in a Post-wild World" by Claudia West and Thomas Rainer is handy for how to plant sustainably, by working with plant communities that are site specific, like wet or dry areas, and what goes on *under* the soil. National Audubon's Plants for Birds site will give you Garden Centers in your area who carry native plants. Have fun and never stop learning. JC

National Audubon's Plants for Birds - <http://www.audubon.org/plantsforbirds>

Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Yardmap and Habitat Network - <http://content.yardmap.org/explore/>

USDA Plant Database - <http://plants.usda.gov/java/>

Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center - <https://www.wildflower.org/plants/>

North Creek Nurseries (Wholesale Only)

<http://www.northcreeknurseries.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/plants.nativePlants/index.htm>

NY Flora Atlas - <http://newyork.plantatlas.usf.edu/>

Plant Native - <http://www.plantnative.org/rpl-nypanj.htm>