



By Trecia E. Neal

Introduction:

First I saw the birds. Then I saw the bees. Then I saw the plants. I was hooked.

I've been a naturalist all my adult life and I've learned that if you want to attract the birds and the bees, you need the right plants. Now, many decades later, I help people discover the joys of gardening with native plants and the pleasure of watching wildlife that they attract

Planting A Garden With Native Plants

Native gardening benefits both humans and other animals. Plants and animals evolved together, so they "know" each other. They'll always choose the "right" dance partner.

Native plants provide food, shelter and places for animals to raise families. And, for the beginning gardener the good news is, native plants require much less care than non-native plants.

Benefits Of Native Plants

Native species and plantings give us a sense of place and belonging, *because they are from here*. They are as familiar as the people you grew up with.

Why do native plants require less care than non-native plants? Because natives evolved locally, they know how to thrive in local weather conditions. This means that they are more drought-tolerant than non-native plants and often aren't very particular about the soil conditions that they grow in. Imagine enjoying more free time because you don't have to mow the lawn as often and also saving money by not purchasing fertilizers and weed killers.

Natural landscapes support local wildlife. Insects are often unable to lay eggs on non-native plants. Mother butterflies and moths are choosy about where they lay their eggs. This is because their babies are very picky eaters. Maybe you've met some children like that?

Natural landscaping is a way for gardeners to support the next generation. If you love birds and would like to see more species in your yard, choose native trees and plants.

Fun facts:

- 96% of bird species feed their babies insects.
- To successfully feed their babies, one pair of chickadees must bring home between 390-570 insects per day for 16 days.
- Chickadees often produce two to three clutches of eggs in one season.
- This means that the hard-working chickadee parents must provide more than 27,000 insects for their young to survive.

Your garden does not have to be all native plant species. Up to 30% of your landscape can be non-natives. There are many non-native plants that have sentimental value, such as Gardenias. I can't imagine a summer without Gardenia perfume wafting through the hot, still air.

Why Non-Native Species Are A Problem

When our ancestors arrived in North America, the plants that greeted them were not like the plants from their homelands. As a result, people brought their favorite plants with them to make them feel more at home. In the United States, this trend continues today, with most plant designers using plants from Asia or South America for home and business landscaping.

Why is this a problem? Because many non-natives are invasive, this means that they take over an area and prevent native plants from growing there. They are harmful to native plants and wildlife, which are often unable to use them for food.

Many scientific studies show that the number of insect species and populations are dwindling, and the introduction of non-native species is known to contribute to this problem.

But I have a lot of grass!?

Wouldn't it be great to not have to spend hours mowing and fertilizing your yard? Grass is currently the largest habitat in the United States. It uses a large amount of water that could be saved.

By carving out some of your lawn to put in native plants, you will cut down on time, expenses and money spent on fertilizers and pesticides.

Transitioning to Native Gardening

Planting native plants isn't an all-or-nothing endeavor. Even the smallest native garden is useful and can make a huge difference. Instead of thinking of our gardens as just something that is pretty, maybe we could start to think of them as a way to make this world a better place by supporting more life, storing carbon, feeding pollinators and managing water.

Which native plants provide the most benefits?

Landscape design is important when transitioning to native landscapes. Planting native trees is one of the most powerful changes you can make in your landscape because they offer many benefits.

Trees

Native trees offer shade, which can reduce cooling costs in our warming climate. They also host numerous animal species.

Fun facts:

- One native oak tree hosts over 534 species of butterflies and moths.
- One non-native Bradford Pear tree hosts one species of insects.
- One non-native Crepe Myrtle tree hosts zero species of insects.

Flowers

If you are interested in flowers to attract butterflies, insects, birds and other wildlife, even a small 6'x6' bed would be a great start with the right native plant choices. There are many amazing native flowers that will come back year after year to provide nectar and pollen for pollinators.

Groundcover

A good native ground cover helps prevent water evaporation from your plants and provides shelter and moist soil for many animals that are eaten by birds. Setting aside a corner of your lawn for leaf litter will provide habitat for earthworms and other decomposers that birds love to eat. Leaving your leaves also provides habitat for fireflies, which are a source of entertainment for the whole family.

Know Your Native Plants

It is important to know the native plants in your area, and I recommend finding your local native plant society or using a reputable online resource such as [Audubon Native Plants](#), the Lady Bird Wildflower Center. Both of these organizations offer easy search tools for soil types, moisture levels and the amount of sunlight in your lawn.

Native plant designers in your area are great resources. If you live in the Atlanta area, I would love to help you transition your property to include native plants. My contact information is <https://greengardensedu.com/>

How Do I Start a New Garden?

1. Native plants are usually not very particular about their soil types. Some have special requirements. However, if you are dealing with hard packed clay (often the result of development) you might need to amend the soil. One of the best ways to do this is to double dig new planting areas and amend with compost or other soil conditioner.

[Double Digging Your Soil](#)

2. See if your county offers free compost. If they don't, consider buying a bag or two of SuperSod. It looks like it's expensive but it is worth every penny when amending soil.

<https://shop.supersod.com/collections/soil-rich-compost>

3. Define the parameters of the new areas. There are several ways to do this. You can use a hose to outline the bed, or try [Outline Chalk Spray](#)

This a temporary chalk spray paint that you can use to demarcate the new beds. It will disappear.

Or, you can use stakes and string.

4. Kill any existing grass in your planting areas. Can use sheet mulching <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/techniques/sheet-mulching-aka-lasagna-composting-builds-soil-saves-time>

or chemical means.

<https://www.thespruce.com/kill-grass-in-flowerbeds-1316108>

5. Order and install plants. Fall is the best time to do this so depending where you are located this would be sometime between September through October.
6. Remember that may of your natives will go dormant in the fall, so you will want to have the beds nicely mulched. Depending on what type of mulch is usually used in your neighborhood you could go with pine mulch or chips.

An alternative to wood mulch or pine straw are leaves that have been through the lawn mower. These will degrade and make new soil, but your neighbors may not be ready for that yet 😊.

7. If you install in the fall of 2021, then either the next fall (Fall 2022) or spring (Spring 2023) you will want to top-dress the beds with 1-3" of compost before you put fresh mulch on them. I usually recommend doing this about every 2-3 years to replenish the soil. A living mulch, or groundcover will eliminate this step eventually.

Fall and winter care for native designs is a little different then what most people are used to. Usually people either pull out their dormant plants and then replant new winter interest, or they cut it all

down. This is anathema for landscaping for wildlife as the whole point is for these plants to provide a habitat, food and over-wintering resources for the wildlife. Putting out signs certifying your yard is critical in this education. I recommend the following places to start with. Displaying these signs in a tasteful way next to the street will help explain to neighbors what you are trying to accomplish with your property.

<https://www.monarchwatch.org/waystations/certify.html>

<https://www.eealliance.org/pollinator-habitat-certification.html>

<https://www.georgiaudubon.org/wildlife-sanctuary-program.html>

<https://rosalyncarterbutterflytrail.org/>

Great Starter Plants For Native Gardens In Georgia

Here are some great native plants in Georgia and other parts of the Southeast to choose from. Remember to check to see if these plants are native to your location

Butterfly Host Plants

Flowers

Asclepias incarnata/ Swamp milkweed

Asclepias perennis/Aquatic milkweed

Asclepias tuberosa/Butterfly milkweed

Symphoricarion novae-angliae/New England Aster

Echinacea purpurea/Purple Coneflower

Eryngium yuccifolium/Rattlesnake Master

Passiflora incarnata/Maypop

Ruellia caroliniensis/Wild petunia

Vernonia gigantea/Ironweed

Butterfly Attracted

Monarch

Monarch

Monarch

Pearl Crescent

Silvery Crescent

Eastern Swallowtail

Gulf & Variegated Fritillary

Common Buckeye

American Lady

Shrubs

Lindera benzoin/Spicebush

Myrica cerifera/Wax Myrtle

Viburnum dentatum/Arrowwood

Vaccinium/Blueberries

Spicebush Swallowtail

Red Spotted Purple

Spring Azure

Eastern Tailed Blue, Spring Azure

Trees

Asimina triloba/Pawpaw

Juniperus virginiana/Eastern Red Cedar

Ptelea trifoliata/Hoptree

Sassafras albidum/Sassafras

Tilia americana/Basswood

Zebra Swallowtail

Red Banded & Juniper Hairstreak

Giant Swallowtail

Spicebush Swallowtail

Red Spotted Purple, Mourning Cloak

Groundcovers

Phyla nodiflora/Fogfruit

Phaon Crescent, White Peacock

Native plants for Birds - Compiled by Ellen Honeycutt <http://usinggeorgianativeplants.blogspot.com/>

Nectivores (Hummingbirds)**Vines:**

Lonicera sempervirens/coral honeysuckle

Bignonia capreolata/crossvine

Shrubs

Aesculus pavia/red buckeye

Rhododendron prunifolium

Perennials

Lobelia cardinalis/ cardinal flower

Salvia/sages

Aquilegia Canadensis/red columbine

Frugivores**Vines:**

Parthenocissus quinquefolia/Virginia creeper

Vitis/grapes

Shrubs

Viburnum species

Aronia/chokeberry

Callicarpa americana/beautyberry

Vaccinium/blueberry

Euonymus americanus/hearts a bustin

Sambucus canadensis/elderberry

Perennials

Rubus/blackberry

Mitchella repens/partridgeberry

Trees

Prunus serotina/Black cherry

Prunus americana/plum

Cornus/dogwood

Amelanchier/serviceberry

Celtis/hackberry/sugarberry

Crataegus/hawthorns

Chionanthus virginicus/fringetree

Nyssa sylvatica/black gum

Granivores**Perennials**

Helianthus/Sunflowers

Silphium

Agastache/hyssop

Eupatorium

Hypericum/St. John's wort

Rudbeckia/black-eyed Susan

Echinacea and *Ratibida*/coneflower

Symphotrichum/aster

Grasses

Panicum/Switchgrass

Sorghastrum nutans Indian grass

Andropogon and *Schizachyrium scoparium*/bluestem

Trees

Acer/Maple

Pinus/pine

Liriodendron/Tulip poplar

Liquidambar/sweetgum

Insectivores (includes 96% of baby birds)

Perennials, shrubs and trees that serve as host plants for butterflies, moths and sawflies

Leaf litter on ground

standing dead trees (shorten for safety if needed)

Omnivores

All of the above plus nut-bearing trees, especially *Quercus*/oaks