

# HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR NEW NATIVE LANDSCAPE

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## “Pleased to meet you, New Native Plants!”

Just as you would with any recent acquaintance, start by learning about these newcomers to your garden. What do they look like? How do they grow? What type of wildlife do they support? How should they be watered? You don’t have to memorize all of this—and feel free to write down the high points—but reading about these plants sparks curiosity and generates a sense of awe and respect for them as you learn how they survive in our landscapes and support us with their ecosystem services.

Knowing how your new natives look in the spring as they emerge makes it less likely that you will accidentally pull or weed out desirable plants. [Native Seedling ID](#) is an excellent guide to the appearance and habitats of some of our native seedlings when they emerge. Some plants will need to be “pinched” back as they emerge to encourage bushier, sturdier growth. These efforts might seem overwhelming at first, but there’s a real “upside” to spending time in your garden with your new friends: it’s a peaceful place to escape from worries and troubles. I highly recommend a book called [“The Well Gardened Mind: The Restorative Power of Nature.”](#)

Learn how to identify when a native plant is dead or dormant (not actively growing above the ground). Spring ephemerals bloom early in the year before the trees leaf out. These are some of our most beautiful and treasured wildflowers and they will become dormant during the heat of the summer. Jack-in-the Pulpit, *Arisaema triphyllum*, Trout Lily (*Erythronium umbilicatum*), and Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) are some great examples. Even though these plants appear dead above the ground, their roots are very much alive and are putting energy into the next year’s growth. Learn which plants these are so you don’t remove them thinking that they are dead. How to avoid this? **Plant labels!** Accurate labeling is critically important.

Be mindful of the wildlife activity in your landscape. The more native plants you have, the more new species of wildlife will come to your yard, and you will want to learn their lifecycles. There may be ground-nesting birds or bees present: pay attention to their life cycles, as burning or mowing their areas during their breeding season would be very disruptive. Ground-nesting

bees love a bare spot of earth. It is fascinating to watch them make their nests and fly to and fro laying their eggs and provisioning their nests with food for their young. These are peaceful, solitary (they don't live in a hive) species that do not sting.

## SPRING

**Weed or pull out** seedlings of desirable plants if there are too many or if they are located in places where you don't want them to grow. This is a great way to meet new neighbors: we put such plants in extra plastic grocery bags with labels identifying the plant species and a sign that says "Free Native Plants." They won't stay long on your curb!

**Replenish mulch** if you can see bare earth beneath it, or shift around ground covers. Sometimes plants need to be divided to stay healthy, and spring is a great time to do this. Organic mulches are best because they break down over time to improve your soil structure. Compost, well-rotted manure, shredded leaves, and pine needles are also good choices. If you use bark or wood mulch, use larger mulch pieces to allow water and air to flow through to the soil. If the wood mulch is too fine, it will form a crust and also promote fungal growth, which can damage your plants.

After the beds have been weeded and soaker hoses installed (if you use them), spread a two-inch-deep layer of mulch over the beds. Make sure to distribute the mulch away from the crowns of the plants. Do not mulch areas that you plan to establish by seeding. You can reapply organic mulches for the first couple of springs after your beds are planted, but by the third year you shouldn't need to mulch native plants..

In early spring, go slowly: don't cut back last year's vegetation to the ground. Instead, just cut back stems and stubble to random varying heights from 8" to 24". This will provide nesting cavities for your stem-nesting native bees. These animals lay eggs at different times during the year. Their larvae grow and develop over the next year, and the adults will emerge from the stems the following year. Don't worry about appearances; your new green growth will quickly hide the "stubble", but you might get sentimental, because watching this process is like being at the "heart of nature." Here is a great graphic representation of how native bees reproduce using stems: [Native Bee Reproduction](#)

Resist the urge to "manicure" your habitat of the fallen leaves from fall and winter. Nature is not tidy. Fallen leaves provide critical food and habitat for snails, insects, fireflies, salamanders, harbor moth and butterfly eggs, larvae, pupae and adults along with many other animals. All of these living things are a critical component of the food cycle. The myth that leaving leaves on your lawn will kill your grass has been proven false.



You can selectively prune shrubs that are at least two years old, but wait to do so until after they flower. Be sure that you know when plants bloom so you aren't cutting off buds that will flower.

Some asters, goldenrods and helianthus bloom after mid-July. These species can get very tall and "leggy" without the native prairie companions in their normal habitats. These plants can flop over in the garden and look messy. It's often helpful to give them a "spring haircut" in late April or the first half of May so they will be sturdier and more compact. You can cut off between 25% to 75%, depending on how tall you want the plants to be. This is fun to experiment with in the garden, and something the whole family can join in on.

Spring is the best time of year to divide and transplant perennials. In this season, heat stress is low, and the plants are in the process of beginning to grow: these are ideal conditions for transplanting. Natives are very hardy, so don't be afraid to get in there with your shovel and just cut away. Make sure that you water these new transplants thoroughly. Transplanting is an excellent opportunity to fill in any gaps in the planting plan.

Once the ground thaws and there is no more danger of freezing, you can begin planting new native perennials and grasses.

## SUMMER

**Weed!** Notice that this is needed in every season; however, the more you encourage your green living mulch (these are native groundcovers and other low-growing plants that can live in shady conditions), the better: the less you will have to weed. Therefore, the older your native landscape gets, the fewer weeds you will have.

Make sure you continue to **monitor** your moisture amounts for new plantings.

**Deadheading** Although this is a common practice in most perennial gardens, I don't usually recommend it in native gardens except for a few species of plants. Native plants provide food for wildlife, and don't we all love to watch those birds? Many native plants excel in providing seeds for

seed-eating birds. At our old house, we went from a yard that had one species of “yard bird”—crows—to a yard that had over one hundred species of yard birds! We achieved this by planting hundreds of native plants in the yard. That’s why you should deadhead only those plants that are aggressive reseederers (thus, know thy plant species). Swamp Sunflower (*Helianthes angustifolius*) is notorious for self-seeding. However, it is one of my favorite plants and provides a striking fall flower and the seeds are relished by birds.

Remember not to remove last year’s plant stubble, as this will have native bee larvae developing in the stems.

Keep an eye out for summer heat stress in your plants, especially in dogwoods. It is normal for the leaves of plants to droop during the heat of the day; however, if the leaves are wilted all of the time, or turning brown around the edges, they need more water. You can expect some leaf drop in certain species like red buckeyes. This is their normal reaction to summer drought and doesn’t mean that they are dying.

Check your plants occasionally for signs of disease. In particular, be on the lookout for a disease called [Aster Yellow Disease](#). Remove any diseased plant material and dispose of it in the trash. **Do not compost these plants.**

Prune summer-blooming shrubs after they have bloomed if it is necessary. Pruning correctly can help determine the shape of a plant when it is full grown. Be on the look-out for branches that cross over each other and remove them when possible.

## FALL

**Weed!** Leave seeds, stubble, fruits and berries on plants. These are vital resources for wildlife, and humans love to look at them, too, during the drab winter. This is a new gardening aesthetic, and may require you to (gently) educate your neighbors. We found it helpful to put up a sign in the fall to remind people of what was occurring in the garden. To keep the garden tidy, you may trim or tie up plants that are falling over.



Mid-September through November (depending on where you live) is a good time to plant new native perennials and grasses. Plants that are put in the ground during the fall will usually be established at the end of the following Spring. Be sure to water them well when planting and to water appropriately during their establishment period.

September through October is also a good time to divide and move perennials and native grasses.

In Fall, clean out your bird houses and bird feeders. In fact, bird feeders, bird houses, and baths should also be cleaned on a regular basis during the year.

Mid November through mid-March is the best time to prune most trees and shrubs. Remove branches that are crossed or crowded. Also, remove dead limbs and unsightly branches—remember, it is YOUR landscape and should give you pleasure! Pruning is an art that requires a lot of thought and attention. It is sometimes worth hiring a pruning expert to prune your trees and shrubs. Here is a guide for pruning trees: [How to Prune Young Shade Trees](#)

If you have prairie plantings and burning is required, be mindful of local burning ordinances and your surroundings. Be sure to observe safety rules when burning and have the appropriate emergency supplies on-hand.

## **WINTER**

In late February to early March, trim back dead sedge and fern foliage before your plants leaf out in the early spring.

Continue watering any newly planted trees or shrubs as necessary. Be especially mindful of winter drought periods. Root systems continue to grow during the winter until the ground freezes solid, but they need water. During the winter, the ground may freeze and thaw multiple times, and during these periods the roots will continue taking up water. If more than a week goes by without enough water (less than one inch), or if the wind is blowing strongly for several days, then your trees and shrubs can become dried out and stressed. If there hasn't been enough rain, use a hose and soak the soil for at least 30 seconds around each newly planted shrub or tree.

You can continue pruning trees, shrubs, and woody vines through late March before they begin leafing out in the spring. Don't prune more than 25% of the living growth of these plants or it can kill them.

Bare-rooted trees and shrubs can be planted in February or early March. These are plants that you buy and they are not in a pot. They usually will have just the earth that immediately surrounds the roots when purchasing.

In winter, food shortages can force rodents and deer to feed on bark, leaves, twigs and flower buds, a necessity for them, but potentially damaging and harmful to your trees and shrubs. You might have to protect new, tender trees and shrubs with wire caging until they become established enough to withstand browsing. Providing a diversity of native plants in the landscape will also help prevent this type of damage, as wildlife prefer to feed in small “buffet” amounts from each plant, and it is only when they are faced with severe food shortages that plants can become seriously damaged.

**Resources:**

Avis, R., Avis, M., & Coen, T. (2021). *Building your permaculture property: A five-step process to design and develop land*. New Society Publishers.

Missouri Prairie Foundation. (n.d.). *Keeping nature near - grow native!* Grow Native! Retrieved December 27, 2021, from <https://grownative.org/>