

The Benefits of Native Plants in Your Home Landscape

Now that spring is finally here many of us are out shopping at the nurseries and garden stores to add some new plants to our home landscape. Here's a suggestion as you select those new plants. "Go native!"

Over the past decade I have learned that native plants generally are more dependable and durable than non-native species. These native plants have evolved locally and can tolerate our tough Wisconsin environment. When they are the right size and shape for our use they are usually a better choice than plants which originated in Europe or Asia. There have been many genetic improvements in our native plants made by the horticultural industry to improve flowering and growth characteristics. The native plants that are available at the garden store are not the same as those growing in the local forest but they do perform the same in the landscape and provide the ecological niche that I will describe next.

Recently I learned that another reason to use native plants is that they provide habitat for beneficial insects. I know, you're asking yourself why would I want more bugs around my house? We really only have negative interactions with less than 5% of the total insect population. I'm referring to the 95% of the insect world which are the 'good bugs'. You probably have never seen many of these insects but they are the primary food source for many of the song bird species we appreciate.

I was involved in the construction of a native prairie and wetland environment near my home which utilized only native plants. An agricultural field was turned into several acres of native habitat and the bird population exploded. Finches, swallows, blue birds and red winged black birds appeared because there is a constant food source of insects that they needed to survive. I learned that planting native plants created an attraction to song birds. Seems like another reason to go native.

Here are a couple of resources to learn more:

"Bringing Nature Home" by Douglas W. Tallamy, Timber Press

http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/plants/pdfs/nursery_list.pdf

<http://prairienursery.com>

<http://agrecol.com>

http://johnsonsnursery.com/Native_Plants_of_Wisconsin.aspx

Randy D. Lueth, ASLA is a consulting Registered Landscape Architect and a member of the Sustainable Marshfield Committee. You can reach him at RLueth@RL-LA.com