

Common Questions about Wildflowers and Native Plants

College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences
Mary H. Meyer, Extension Horticulturist, University of Minnesota
Peter Olin, Director, Minnesota Landscape Arboretum

What is the difference between a native plant, wildflower, and an “exotic” (non-native) or introduced plant?

A native plant is usually defined as one that was growing naturally in a specific area before white or European settlement. A wildflower, also called a forb, is a native plant that grows without human care. Non-native plants are sometimes called “exotics”, whether they were introduced hundreds of years ago by settlers and travelers, or recently purchased from a mail order nursery catalog. People, however, aren’t the only agents in plant relocation; they are spread through the actions of birds, animals, wind, and water.

Are native plants easier to grow?

It depends on the plant, and the garden site. Many natives, like brown-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), are easy to grow in a wide range of conditions and are found in many states. Others are specific to a certain area and add a unique regional flavor to the landscape.

However some, such as orchids, are difficult to grow except under very special conditions.

Is it true that native species require no care and maintenance?

This sounds too good to be true, and unfortunately it is. We’d all love a no-work garden. Like any plant in your landscape, natives require care, including management in a prairie setting or control of insects and diseases in a garden setting. With careful selection, you can have a low-maintenance garden of native plants. No planned landscape can keep its original good looks without care.

My neighbor’s back yard looks like a weed patch. Could those be native plants?

Maybe. Ask your neighbor. Growing wildflowers in place of lawn requires a new way of looking at your home landscape. A naturalized garden will not be as formal as a perennial border. However, informality does not mean neglect. A native garden can be a rich collection of ever-changing colors and textures. Care will be needed to keep undesirable weedy species out of naturalized areas. Talk to your neighbors about their landscaping goals—turning lawn into prairie takes several years or more, and some stages may look “weedy” to you. Have patience—the results can be spectacular!

If you are considering this on your own property, remembering a few “elements of care” can make a natural landscape acceptable. These include decorative fencing around a planting, paths, signs, benches, and birdhouses. All of these show that the “natural landscape” is planned and meant-to-be.

Can you transplant native plants from the wild?

Permission from the property owner is required before you remove any native plant from its natural habitat. Also, most wild plants do not transplant well. The conditions in which they have been growing are often difficult to duplicate in the home garden. Native mycorrhizal fungi exist in natural habitats and are critical to successful growth of many wildflowers. Commercial propagation of native plants makes many of them available safely at garden centers and nurseries. Your best bet is to buy nursery-propagated stock or to plant seed.



Aren't all native plants also endangered species?

No, but a few are. Of the over 2,400 species of Minnesota native plants, the Department of Natural Resources lists 191 as endangered, threatened, or special concern, which protects them by state and federal law. Disturbing such plants could destroy remaining populations. Any plant on the endangered or threatened species list may not by law be dug from the wild without special permit. Included on the lists for Minnesota are several orchids, trilliums, gentians, sedges, and lotus.

I've heard purple loosestrife called a "noxious weed". What does that mean? I thought it was a wildflower.

Purple loosestrife may appear to be an attractive wildflower, but it is non-native, extremely aggressive, and a serious problem in our wetlands. A natural hybrid between the European garden variety and our native species is crowding out other wetland plants, reducing food for wildlife. "Noxious weeds" are identified by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. These are plants that seriously endanger the health of humans or livestock, or have a serious negative effect on crops or natural areas. Both native and non-native species, such as field bindweed, hemp, poison ivy, leafy spurge, and several thistles, are on the noxious weed list.

Do all non-native plants crowd out native species and damage the environment?

Some exotics grow much better in disturbed areas such as roadsides and old fields than native plants. Some grow so well that they become a nuisance or even a serious problem. However, the vast majority of non-natives are well-behaved garden plants like flowering crabapple or peony. Adding these non-natives to your home landscape helps create a highly diverse environment, and provides a broad number of plants to grow on a wide variety of sites. Planting all natives can also be an attractive landscape alternative, but be sure to include a wide range of plants to keep diversity high.

Are native plants better for the environment than other plants?

No plant is ethically "better" than another—it all depends on the way you need to use it. Natives are certainly an excellent choice for giving a natural, regional look to your home. They are not automatically more disease resistant, drought tolerant, hardier, or easier to grow than are non-natives. The "best" landscape is one where a broad range of plants is carefully chosen to fit the local site, soil, climatic conditions, and preferences of the homeowner. Gardens are for people after all, and are meant to be enjoyed.

For more information on native plants consult the following resources:

University of Minnesota Extension Service publications, available through your local county extension office or 1-800-876-8636:

BU-6711 *Butterfly Gardening*

FO-6955 *Managing Aquatic Plants in Minnesota Lakes*

FO-3238 *Plants in Prairie Communities*

FO-6748 *Establishing and Maintaining a Prairie Garden*

BU-0486 *Minnesota's Forest Trees*

FO-5620 *Identification of the Primary Noxious Weeds in Minnesota*

EP- 6700 *Using Native Plants Video and Educational Packet*

The Uncommon Ones, Minnesota's Endangered Plants and Animals. 1989. B. Coffin and L. Pfannmuller; DNR Information Center. 1-800-652-9747.

Minnesota's Endangered Flora and Fauna, 1988. edited by B. Coffin and L. Pfannmuller; University of Minnesota Press, 473 pp. 1-800-388-3863.

F0-6065-A

Revised 1998

www.extension.umn.edu

Copyright © 1998, Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.

For ordering information call 612-625-8173.

Produced by Communication and Educational Technology Services, University of Minnesota Extension Service.

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this material is available in alternative formats upon request. Please contact your University of Minnesota county extension office or, outside of Minnesota, contact the Distribution Center at (612) 625-8173.

The University of Minnesota Extension Service is an equal opportunity educator and employer.

Printed on recycled paper with minimum 10% postconsumer waste.