

Create your native plant garden

Gardening is a worthwhile endeavor that not only passes the time, but can be a form of exercise and relief from the daily grind.

Gardens also provide ample opportunity to experiment, as individuals can produce everything from vegetables to bountiful blooms.

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on eco-friendly gardening that aims to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect the planet. One way to do so is to rely on native plants.

What are native plants?
Native plants are indigenous to particular regions. The National Wildlife Federation says native plants grow in habitats without human introduction or intervention. Native plants have formed symbiotic relationships with local wildlife over thousands of years, which the NWF notes makes them the most sustainable options. Native plants help the environ-

ment and thrive with little supplemental watering or chemical nutrients.

Natives vary by region
Native plants vary by region. In arid climates, certain succulents may be native because they don't need much rainfall to thrive. In lush wetlands, succulents might be out of place.

Start native planting
The NWF offers native plants for 36 different states that can be shipped right to customers' doors to help replenish native varieties.

In addition, gardeners can visit local gardening centers to select native plants. Small and independently owned centers often feature knowledgeable local staff whose expertise can prove invaluable to individuals seeking native varieties.

It's important to keep in mind that native varieties may look less cultivated than more exotic blooms and foliage designed to sell for their unique appearances. Wildflowers and native grasses may be the types of native plants found in abundance, which may

grow up and out quickly. These other tips can help the process.

- Plan and prepare the site by removing weeds and turning over the soil. This will give seedlings an opportunity to take root without competition from weeds.

Seedlings will give gardens a faster head-start than waiting around for seeds to germinate. However, gardeners can start seeds indoors and then move them outside once they are seedlings.

- Avoid planting native plants in rows, as that's not how they're likely to grow naturally. Vary the placement so the plants look like they sprouted up haphazardly.

- Gardeners can still exert some control over native gardens prone to growing a little wild. Borders and paths can better define the growing areas.

- Grow Native!, an initiative from the Missouri Prairie Foundation, suggests planting two to four species in broad sweeping masses

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NATIVE PLANTS — Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on eco-friendly gardening that aims to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect the planet. One way to do so is to rely on native plants.

Americans asked to protect plants by looking for invasive pests in area

WASHINGTON — The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently declared April 2023 as Invasive Plant Pest and Disease Awareness Month (IPPDAM). This national outreach month is dedicated to highlighting the impact of invasive plant pests and diseases on plants nationwide and informing Americans how they can help reduce their spread.

IPPDAM aims to raise public awareness about the threat and how U.S. residents can help protect U.S. resources from hungry pests.

"Each year, invasive insects and plant diseases cause an estimated \$40 billion in damages to plants that sustain us," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "Invasive species threaten our food security, agricultural livelihoods and way of life. Luckily, there's a lot we can do to protect our resources. This spring, familiarize yourself with the invasive pest quarantines in your area and do your part to avoid inadvertently moving invasive insects and plant diseases to new areas."

"Many invasive plant pests and diseases are natural hitchhikers and can be hard to see. It's all too easy to unintentionally move them to new areas," said Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs Jenny Moffitt. "Invasive Plant Pest and Disease Awareness Month is a reminder to all of us to limit the spread of plant pests and diseases."

Nonnative plant pests can hitchhike in untreated firewood, attach themselves to cars, boats and other outdoor surfaces — or take a ride in the mail. They can travel to new areas on agricultural material such as soil, seeds, homegrown produce and plants.

Invasive pests have few or no natural predators in their new environments, so their populations quickly outpace native species and spread. These nonnative plant pests and diseases disrupt the ecosystems and reduce biological diversity. Climate change can mag-

nify the impact of invasive species by increasing the level of plant pest infestations and disease infection, allowing pests to produce more generations each year, and increasing their suitable habitat. USDA needs the public's help to protect the ecosystems, food supply, livelihoods and way of life from the devastating impact invasive pests have on domestic plant health each year. Together Americans can make a difference.

To protect domestic plant health:

- Learn about possible quarantines in the area, as well as the signs of invasive pest infestation on wild plants and agriculture.

- Invasive plant pest egg masses on outdoor surfaces are easily mistaken for a smear of mud, so it's important to clean cars and outdoor gear before traveling with them to new places.

- If signs of new invasive plant pests and diseases are found in the area, report them to the local Extension office, state department of agriculture or USDA State Plant Health Director's office.

- Don't move untreated firewood — even if it looks pest-free on the outside. To avoid unintentionally spreading tree-killing beetles that hide in firewood, buy or source wood locally, or use certified, heat-treated firewood.

- Source plants and seeds responsibly. When ordering online, ensure the plant is coming from a domestic source or follow import regulations. If buyers don't know where an agricultural product is coming from, don't buy it online. U.S. regulations apply to the importer of record — meaning the person purchasing and importing the product from overseas — not the online merchant. Learn how to safely and legally order plants and seeds online.

- Don't mail homegrown plants, fruits and vegetables to avoid inadvertently mailing a plant pest with them.

- When in doubt, contact the local USDA State Plant Health Director's office to find out what to do before buying seeds or plants on-

line from an international vendor or before mailing homegrown agricultural goods.

- To comply with U.S. laws and avoid introducing new invasive species into the U.S., declare all agricultural items, including seeds, soil and handicrafts to U.S. Customs and Border Protection for inspection when returning from overseas travel.





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