



Why Plant Native

Simply put, by planting native flowers we are helping to provide critical food sources and habitat for declining populations of butterflies, bees and all pollinators. Native plants provide nectar for pollinators including hummingbirds, native bees, butterflies, moths, and bats. In addition to providing vital habitat for pollinators, other species of wildlife benefit as well from native plants. Native plants also provide protective shelter for mammals who depend on them for their very survival. The native nuts, seeds, and fruits produced by these plants offer essential foods for all forms of wildlife.

To some people, the difference between a native, non-native, and invasive plant may seem small, but oh, how important the difference is. Native plants evolved in this region, have adapted to competing with other native species, and they are susceptible to natural enemies like herbivores and parasites. In other words, they are subject to natural control. Exotic plants, however, evolved somewhere else, and have been brought in. Sometimes, exotic plants are well-behaved. Other times, they lose all sense of manners and spread to areas into which they were not introduced, like house guests prowling through your night stand. When this happens, they are said to be *invasive* (both the plant and the house guest). They have no natural enemies, so they just go hog wild.

Once established in natural areas, invasive plants can quickly out-compete native plants for resources, thus reducing the abundance and diversity of our native flora. Some invasives even compete with natives for pollinators, literally attracting pollinators to their blooms and away from native flowers. There is even evidence that invasive shrubs like Amur (bush) honeysuckle and Japanese barberry can increase the abundance of ticks that can carry Lyme disease. So, preventing the spread of invasive plants is also a human health issue.

Indeed, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. For home gardeners, the best means of prevention is only planting native species. Native species are more likely to survive and thrive, will almost always require less water, and they play a critical role in supporting pollinators. The second best option is to do your homework before purchasing an exotic. Avoid any plant that is known to be invasive or aggressive, and consider putting them in pots instead of directly into the ground. You don't want them running loose. Like fast-running zombies, invasive plants seem docile from a distance, but when you least expect it, they've eaten the heads off your coneflowers and are taking over your yard.

Unfortunately, many stores don't carry a broad selection of native plants. So, we have to increase the demand by specifically asking for them. The Cincinnati Nature Center is working to make native plants more accessible. We currently hold two native plant sales a year, and we are developing a native plant propagation program that will allow us to organize more. My challenge to you is to start this spring by replacing a single exotic plant in your yard with a native one. When you visit a nursery, just ask a staff person to help you transition from the exotic plants you normally buy to native equivalents that won't bully the natives.

Spring has sprung – happy gardening!