

Home & Garden

Native Plants: Beyond Pretty

by [Karin Ursula Edmondson](#), March 28, 2011



Like a fairy-tale heroine’s transformation from ugly duckling to radiant swan, native plants are garnering fervent support from ever-increasing numbers of garden professionals and home enthusiasts. According to landscape architect Carolyn Summers, it was only after a series of popular books on horticulture and ecology by Bill Cullina were published in 2000 that native plant admiration gained serious traction in the imagination of gardeners. Summers, an adjunct professor for continuing education at Westchester Community College, is the author of *Designing Gardens with Flora of the American East*, an informative and precise narrative on designing with indigenous plants and gardening responsibly with exotic or non-indigenous plant species. Summers will be the keynote speaker at Going Native, this year’s Annual Garden Day Event hosted by Cornell Cooperative Extension at SUNY Ulster in Stone Ridge on Saturday, April 16.

Native or indigenous—Summers prefers “indigenous” because it refers to precise regional or ecological boundaries—plants are “essential for the continued survival of native insect pollinators and the birds and other wildlife that depend on them.” Indigenous plants form the basis of the food chain in an ecosystem. Plants and animals in a particular place evolve together and become interdependent. In order for a garden to produce indigenous butterflies, it must include indigenous plants for caterpillars to eat; the leaves of non-indigenous plants are simply too alien for caterpillars to (literally) swallow. No caterpillars. No butterflies. Gardening with natives is complex and layered. More than just simply providing bright flowers to lure butterflies, it creates an indigenous environment that provides nutrients to assist the lifecycle of butterflies and other pollinators and the larger landscape milieu.

Consciousness of the interconnectivity of life is essential to responsible garden design. The goal of many a gardener and landscape professional is to beautify the world with plants, gardens, and designed landscapes, but despite admirable intent, without adequate facts, home gardeners and professionals alike can inflict long-standing damage to the environment. For example, the Norway maple tree, planted profusely in Central Park by revered landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmstead, is now known to be an aggressive invasive that crowds out native trees and destroys forest ecosystems. Summers provides beautiful indigenous alternatives to the Norway maple, especially of the purple-leafed variety, such as chokecherry, which displays similar hardiness and aesthetic characteristics of the Norway maple but with the added benefit of providing a food source for indigenous wildlife. Japanese barberry, another invasive offender, has not only escaped cultivated gardens to naturalize in Northeast woodlands but, according to Summers, in

“Connecticut barberries have been recently been identified as a public health hazard, as large concentrations of deer ticks infested with Lyme disease have been found on mice living under them.”

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Summers addresses nonindigenous heirloom plants like lilac, peonies, and bearded iris—so much part of the beloved Northeast garden vernacular yet nonnatives. On one hand, they are not invasive but on the other—they are not “productive members of the regional food web.” She also asserts that a native garden does not have to consist entirely of natives nor does it have to be wild in form. Summers advocates that it is entirely possible to have a formal garden consisting of indigenous plants. She also allows that nonindigenous plants, when planted with knowledge of reproductive capabilities—“safe sex in the garden”—are beautiful and most likely won’t harm the landscape.

Aesthetic qualities of natives encompass the visuals of form, flower, branching, and color but other admirable attributes like food sources, low-maintenance upkeep, nonaggressive tendencies, and little or no resource allocation in the form of fertilizers and excessive watering combine to make native plants the optimal choice for modern sustainable gardens and landscapes.

To register, or for more information on the 2011 Going Native Garden Day:
(845) 340-3990; www.cceulster.org. Carolyn Summers: www.carolynsummers.net.

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