



One of the author's gardens.

Gardening with Native Plants

By Barbara Nuffer

photos provided by author unless otherwise noted

It's springtime and for many, thoughts turn to gardening. If you're one of the millions of people who enjoy landscaping or gardening, consider using native plants in your project. Native plants are low-maintenance because they are already adapted to our local environment, and they attract local wildlife.

Native plants are defined as those species that would have been found in your geographic area before the arrival of European settlers. They are the perfect solution to achieving true low-maintenance plantings. If the plants are provided with the same soil type, level of moisture, and sun or shade that they would find in their natural setting, they will live a relatively carefree life—no need for the routine maintenance (such as

pruning and fertilizing) that labor-intensive, non-native, ornamental garden plants demand. Furthermore, native plants rarely require treatment for disease and insect problems because they have evolved to resist them.

Another enjoyable reward of using native plants is the variety of wildlife they attract. Native plants provide food, cover, shelter and nesting sites for birds and other animals which thrive in this native landscape. According to Stephen Kress of the National Audubon Society: "Native plants, which have co-evolved with native wild birds, are more likely to provide a mix of foods—the right size, with the right kind of nutrition—just when the birds need them."



columbine

Unlike the case with many non-native ornamental plants, the timing of flowering and fruiting of native plants corresponds to meet the needs of particular bird or animal species. For instance, the white flowers of the attractive Virginia creeper eventually mature into blue fruits that become an important source of food for birds in late winter when other food sources are scarce. Many types of woodpeckers and robins enjoy this nourishing food. Interestingly, these same berries are toxic to mammals due to their

high levels of oxalates. In addition, the oxalates in the plant's leaves prevent deer from eating the plant, making it an ideal addition to your garden.

Using non-native plants can be detrimental to the natural landscape and have negative impacts on local wildlife. For example, purple loosestrife—introduced in the 1880s from Europe, Asia and Africa—has spread like wildfire, pushing out native plants like broad-leaved cattail species in many of our wetlands. This has affected a number of our wildlife species,



The milkweed plant can attract butterflies (like this fritillary sp.) and hummingbirds to your garden.

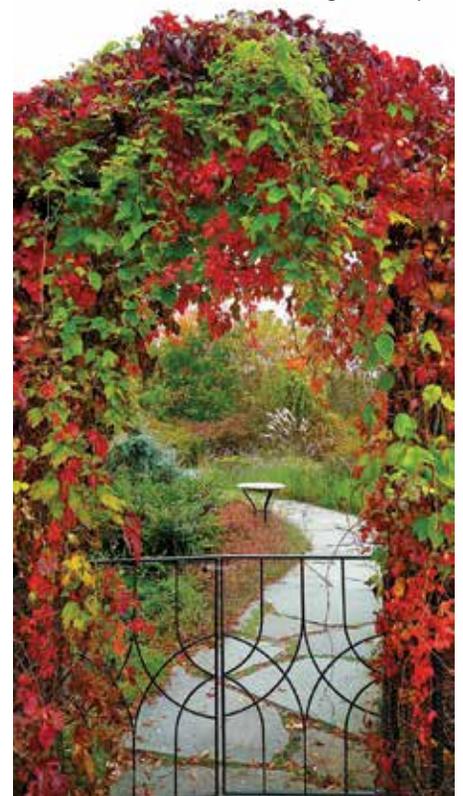
including muskrats which use cattails for food and for building their homes. Many types of waterfowl will also avoid wetlands choked with purple loosestrife as it does not provide adequate nesting cover. Additionally, songbirds will not eat the small, hard seeds of loosestrife.

By reintroducing native plants to your yard, you will likely attract local birds and wildlife which you can enjoy watching. Easily maintained, as well as beautiful, native plants may be the answer to creating the garden you've always wanted.

To get you started on your own native garden, check out the website for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center www.wildflower.org/collections for a huge database that includes more than 100 plants native to New York. And be sure to purchase your native plants from responsible nurseries or garden centers.

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Virginia creeper



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