

Time to Get Back to the Garden and Go Native

By [Dan Aubrey](#), May 13, 2020 ~ Princetoninfo.com

“How better to show you care about the future than by planting a tree?” says Tina Notas, director of land stewardship at the D&R Greenway in Princeton.



The native plant nursery at the D&R Greenway.

Notas’ talk about planting is connected with the D&R Greenway’s annual native plant sale pickup set for Friday and Saturday, May 15 and 16. It’s the first of several through the year. Online orders are being accepted through Wednesday, May 13.

Started in 2007 to introduce native plants to the community, the Greenway’s nursery stocks more than 50 species of native plants essential for regional wildlife. That includes trees, shrubs, perennial wildflowers, grasses, sedges, and ferns ranging in cost from \$5 to \$25. The nursery also supplies plants for the D&R land preserves — open space acquired and maintained by the Greenway.

“I mainly manage the preserves — the nursery supplies our preserves with native plants that support birds and other pollinators,” says Notas. “Managing our 74 preserves is like taking care of a very large family. They always need care. We call this stewardship. Stewarding the preserves includes removing non-native species that are slowly destroying the ecosystem — and re-planting with natives.”

She says that oak and cherry trees are a few important native species because they support hundreds of other species in our region. However she can also advise on trees that provide fruit and beauty.

Regarding fruits, she says, “Pawpaw, persimmon, blueberry, and chokeberry (too bad about the name!) are all edible fruit shrubs or trees we sell from our nursery. We also sell beach plum, which can be made into a jam.”

In terms of flowers, she has a quick list and what they attract: Milkweed for monarch butterflies, Joe-pye to support more than 30 species of butterflies and moths, and blueberry, a host plant for more than 200 species in our region.

“Milkweed is an obvious best seller because we want to help bring back the monarch population,” she adds. “New England Aster and Goldenrod always sell quickly as well. I believe that is due to the great color combination of purple and blues, which is also really appealing to our native bees.”

In addition to the preserves, Notas also plants natives in her own yard. “We just purchased our property a little over a year ago. Last year, I added natives in the mint family like narrowleaf mountain mint, wild bergamot, and spotted bee balm because I love the smell, and they’re deer resistant. This weekend I added some phlox for early spring color, dogwood shrubs for the birds, and blueberries for my family.”

Asked about the native plant she found the most intriguing, she says, “I really enjoy Indigo for its seed pods that make great rattlers in the fall.”

Originally from Greece, where her parents tended gardens, she discovered New Jersey native plants as a part of a high school field trip to the New Jersey Pine Barrens. “I learned about pitch pines, pitcher plants, and sphagnum moss — all native plants to the Pine Barrens — and I was hooked.”

She adds that she also attended the New Jersey Governor’s School on the Environment and later an environmental school in New York State, but “the trips to the Pine Barrens were the first time I had seen such extensive forest in NJ. I grew up mainly in urban North Jersey.”

Notas and the Greenway are not alone in their interest in native species. Rutgers University’s Department of Agriculture shares information through a web page called “Incorporating Native Plants in Your Residential Landscape.”

According site writers Meredith Melendez, agriculture and natural resources agent in Mercer County, and Deborah Pinto, horticulture consultant, Burlington County, “The term native plant is fluid and can have many different meanings. In general, native plants are species that were present at the beginning of the European settlement of North America. These plants, over time, have evolved to grow in a specific region. Native plants have established complex relationships with other native plants, insects, and animals, some of which are dependent on one another to thrive. Generally, native plants naturally occur within a radius of 100 miles of your area, and many can do well with a minimum of care once established.”



Phlox, which blooms in New Jersey from April to June.

They add since native plants have evolved to thrive in a specific region, they “support their ecosystems more diversely than exotic plantings. While many homeowners have incorporated flowering plants in their landscapes to attract certain birds and butterflies, a habitat to support insect life is greatly needed. Exotic plants may offer a nectar source for wildlife, but in many cases their leaves, fruits, pollen, and nectar are not the preferred food of our vital native insects and wildlife. The lack of proper habitat and food sources for native birds and insects is one factor in the decline of many of these species in the United States.”

That is followed by another consideration. “The reliance on standard exotic landscape plants leads to predictable landscapes regardless of the region. This creates a loss of regional aesthetic identity. Homeowners who desire for pristine landscapes have created residential properties devoid of leaf and plant litter. With proper planning you can maintain a more natural landscape using native plants, saving money on fertilizers and achieving a lower maintenance landscape.”

The Rutgers site also helps gardeners explore three elements to successful planting — types of soil, sunlight conditions, and hydration — and a guide to assist planning.

You can learn more at njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1140/

Another resource is the Native Plant Society of New Jersey that, according to its website, is “dedicated to the appreciation, protection, and study of the native flora of New Jersey.

Founded in 1985, organizers say the nonprofit has “hundreds of members across the state, and are organized into county and regional chapters. Our members include gardeners, horticulturists, naturalists, landscape designers, students, and native plant enthusiasts from all walks of life.”

The group conducts lectures and presentations on topics ranging from introduction to native plants, gardening with natives, identification and appreciation of the beautiful flora and ecosystems of New Jersey, and ecological landscaping.

A West Central Chapter of the society serving the greater Princeton area meets in Cranbury.

For more information, visit the Native Plant Society’s website at www.npsnj.org.

But for those considering planting a native species right away, Notas shares some thoughts. “Any new planting should be watered the first year for better survival. If you’re getting a tree, you should probably put a cage around it to protect it from the overabundant deer in our region. But, first and foremost, check out our plant catalog. Volunteers helped put together descriptions in the catalog that include sun and soil requirements of each plant. Give your plant what it needs to survive by putting it in the correct habitat.”

Thinking beyond this year, she says, “Consider it a gift to the next generation. By planting native plants, you’re helping rebuild our ecosystem and the services it provides. The immediate benefit is you’ll have this beautiful plant in your yard to enjoy and it will attract pollinators that aren’t too bad to look at either.”

And with the future on everyone’s mind during our current health crisis, this year’s spring planting can take on more significance.

For details on the D&R Greenway’s plant sales: www.drgreenway.org/shop/native-plants.