



# Simply Native

Using Native Plants to Enhance Landscapes & Gardens



An educational series brought to you through a partnership between the Georgia Piedmont Land Trust and the Georgia Native Plant Society

The series called **Simply Native** gives you ideas about the native plants you could select for your yard or garden that will offer value beyond mere attractiveness. The Georgia Piedmont Land Trust and the Georgia Native Plant Society join to encourage the use of native plants because it provides an easy way to create habitat for birds, pollinators and other wildlife that they may not otherwise have available.

## Native plants defined

"What is and is not a native plant is best defined by nature herself," says Doug Tallamy, Professor and Chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware, in his book *Bringing Nature Home*. "Because plants do not grow in isolation from the other living things around them and are in fact essential to the lives of neighboring creatures, they interact with the residents of their habitats in countless ways. Over immense periods of time, these interactions help shape both the plants and the animals in a particular place."

With this in mind, we begin to see the importance of selecting plants that have "co-evolved" in our region over those which do not have this critical relationship with some very important wildlife.

## Getting started is easy

Creating a beautiful garden with native plants doesn't have to be a daunting task, however. Ideally, your garden has plants from the tallest or canopy level; the understory level characterized by small trees; the shrub and herbaceous level; and on the ground. With plants fitting into each of these vertical layers, you have created the structure of nature. Now consider which native plants will fill the needs of the wildlife you want to attract.

Start with native trees providing the canopy or highest level. Our native oak species (*Quercus* spp.) – white, Southern red, chestnut, even water oaks – support



hundreds of native species, from larger mammals such as deer, raccoons and squirrels to turkeys and even wood ducks. These trees provide nesting cavities for a variety of birds from chickadees and wrens to bluebirds (photo left), various woodpeckers and

flickers to owls. And the story gets better: "What we have underappreciated in the past, however, is the diversity of insect herbivores that oaks add to forest ecosystems," says Tallamy. "From this perspective, oaks are the quintessential wildlife plants: no other plant genus supports more species of Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), thus providing more types of bird food, than the mighty oak."



Plant Spicebush or Sassafras as larval hosts for this Spicebush swallowtail beauty.

Since nearly all bird species that nest in our region must have a plentiful supply of protein to feed their nestlings, the plants, such as oak and other species, that support an array of insect species – beneficial and even those we consider pests -- are particularly important. And the butterflies and related insects we admire throughout the warm months require both flowers as nectar

sources and the host plants where they lay their young. Frequently, host species are different from nectar sources.



Eastern Tiger Swallowtail favors Birches, Black cherry, Tulip poplar and Willows as host plants for its young.

Other valuable canopy tree species include willow (*Salix*), the wild cherry trees (*Prunus* spp.), birch (*Betula*), Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*) and tulip poplars (*Liriodendron*).

Understory trees such as southern Dogwoods (*Cornus alternifolia*, *C. amomum* and *C. florida*), Eastern redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) and Eastern redcedar trees

(*Juniperus virginiana*) are important as food sources for an array of birds, as well, yielding berries, insects and shelter.



Cedar waxwings pose on a Serviceberry bush.

Among shrubs, Viburnums (*Viburnum* spp.), New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*), Serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), various blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) and Virginia sweetspire (*Itea*) also provide rich food sources.

Herbaceous or perennial plants that support lots of bird, butterfly and pollinator species include Asters (*Asteraceae* spp.), Coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.), Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), Bee balm (*Monarda* spp.), Virginia Mountainmint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), Tradescantia (*Tradescantia* spp.), Black-eyed susans (*Rudbeckia* spp.), Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*), Annual blanketflower (*Gaillardia pulchella*), and the goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.) provide food for an array of birds, even as they light up a garden with vivid colors at various times of the growing season.

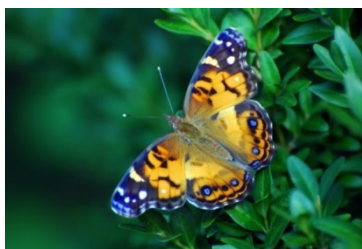
Adding vines such as Passionflower or Maypop (*Passifloraceae*) and Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*), then leaving some Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) rounds out a selection of plants that can attract hundreds of species, while providing nearly any garden with visual diversity.



Passionflower vines will attract the Gulf Fritillary and its unique looking caterpillar.

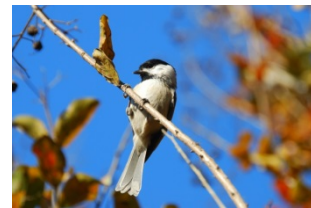
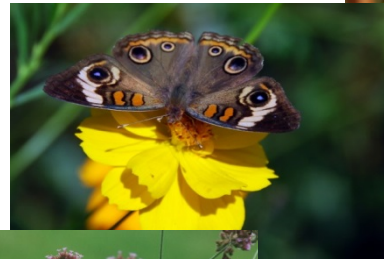
Plenty of pollinators, including butterflies, prefer the plants we call “weeds” as host plants for their young or as food sources for themselves.

Consider allowing some out-of-the-way fringe areas to remain a bit weedy and unkempt. This is perfect habitat for ground-foraging birds, as well, including robins, Brown thrashers, Towhees, sparrows and juncos.



This American painted lady likes Pussy-toes, a perennial ground cover and weedy Cudweed, for its young. Adults nectar on many Aster varieties.

Finally, all these species you’ve attracted to your yard will provide just the pest control you need.



Using chemical pesticides and insecticides may harm or even kill the very wildlife you’ve been working to entice to your yard.

You can attract any of the species shown above (from top) – Ruby-throated hummingbird, Common buckeye butterfly, Carolina chickadee and American goldfinch – by enhancing your garden with native selections, leaving a few weedy fringes untouched and eliminating chemical insecticides and herbicides. Who wouldn’t want a landscape alive with these and other pollinators?

**All photographs except the Bluebird by Suzy Downing. Thank you!**

Sources: *Bringing Nature Home*, Doug Tallamy; *Butterflies of Georgia*, Jaret C. Daniels.

Native plants are available at local nurseries such as Buck Jones Nursery in Grayson and Woodstock; Nearly Native Nursery in Fayetteville; and Randy’s in Lawrenceville.

#### ABOUT

The Georgia Piedmont Land Trust and Georgia Native Plant Society have partnered to create an informational series to encourage Georgia gardeners to incorporate Georgia’s native plants into their landscapes and gardens.

The **Georgia Piedmont Land Trust (GPLT)** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of open and green space in the Piedmont region of Georgia. GPLT believes that protected natural and open spaces are essential for healthy communities, positive quality of life and the wildlife that depends upon this habitat. For more information visit our website at: [www.gplt.org](http://www.gplt.org)

The **Georgia Native Plant Society (GNPS)** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the stewardship and conservation of Georgia’s native plants and their habitats. For more information visit our website at: [www.gnps.org](http://www.gnps.org)