

Why We Should Consider Adding Native Plants to Our Landscapes
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During this time of social distancing, many of us are spending more time at our homes than ever before and are focused on our lawns, flower beds, and home vegetable gardens. As we ponder our home landscapes, we can consider landscaping not just for aesthetic purposes but for increasing habitat and food sources for wildlife. Increasingly, homeowners are looking to augment the biodiversity of their properties with Maine native plants that attract birds, insects, and mammals that are also native to Maine. The plants and animals that were in the area now known as Maine, prior to European settlement, are considered native.

Why are native plants on our properties so important to our wildlife and the ecosystem that we live within? With habitat loss due to the construction of roads, bridges, and buildings, many wildlife species do not have the space they need to nest, breed, and raise their young. If wildlife cannot find what they need in a patch of habitat, they will move to find it, even to their own demise. Douglas Tallamy, a professor at the University of Delaware, writes, "...we need to restore nature to our home landscapes, to our corporate landscapes, to our municipal parks, and to as much of our infrastructure as we can, because our parks and preserves are not large enough to do the job alone."

Fortunately, native Maine plants are adapted to the local climate and will thrive if they are planted in appropriate spaces based on their needs for sunlight and water. Also, fortunate, is that native plants don't need fertilizers to grow well. They will erupt through leaf mulch in the spring without a problem, as they evolved to do. The best native plants are grown from seed collected in Maine in the wild. The Wild Seed Project website lists their classes in growing native Maine plants from seed, through venues like Maine Audubon, local adult education programs, and more. The best seed sowing time is November through February. The Wild Seed Project sells native plant seeds online, however, now is the time to purchase more established plants from local nurseries.

Heather McCargo of the Wild Seed Project writes that consumers need to ask nurseries to stock Maine native plants grown locally from seed and without pesticides, especially neonicotinoids, systemic pesticides that travel throughout the plant and potentially negatively impact pollinators, such as bees, flies, birds, and butterflies. Heather writes, "Let's help our growers make this shift over the coming years so that our gardens and landscapes can be filled with genetically diverse native flora that nourishes the insects, birds, and mammals of Maine."

The Wild Seed Project maintains a list of the best native plant sources for our area (<https://wildseedproject.net/buy-native-plants/>). See their blog post, Navigating the Nurseries: How to Find Native Plants (https://wildseedproject.net/2016/05/navigating-the-nurseries-how-to-find-native-plants/?mc_cid=1a9d89504a&mc_eid=f12636130d)

on their website. The Scarborough Land Trust and Maine Audubon host annual native plant sales. SLT co-hosted their plant sale with Rebel Hill Farm in May. Maine Audubon at Gilsland

Farm in Falmouth is hosting its fifth native plant sale this year through a new website for online native plant sales (<https://www.maineaudubon.org/projects/plants/>) and expect to start taking online orders on June 13 for curbside pickup starting on June 18. If you don't know where to start, plant some milkweed from a local nursery or plant sale, and likely your yard will attract the monarch butterflies that depend on the native milkweed plants to lay their eggs. Planting even a few native plants this spring, summer, or fall will increase biodiversity, provide wildlife habitat and food sources, and support local non-profits, small farms, and local businesses that are trying to help us return natives to our Maine landscapes.

Suggested Reading:

Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens and Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation that Starts in Your Yard

(<http://www.bringingnaturehome.net>) by Douglas W. Tallamy (available for purchase online and at the Scarborough Public Library)

Bringing Nature Home, a conservation project of Maine Audubon inspired by the work of Doug Tallamy and made possible by a Scarborough couple, Jim and Ann Hancock (<https://www.maineaudubon.org/projects/plants/>) with The Maine Native Plant Finder button that is an online search tool to help homeowners and landscapers choose the best plants for specific properties.

Native Plants For Your Maine Garden by Maureen Heffernan (available online through used book stores and at the Scarborough Public Library).

Wild Seed Project website and *Wild Seed* magazine (<https://wildseedproject.net>)