



SHAWNEE COUNTY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENERS

NATIVE PLANT DEMONSTRATION GARDEN

WHY NATIVE PLANTS?

A plant is considered native if it occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction.¹ Native plants have the greatest impact when planted in places that match their growing requirements. They thrive in the soil and weather conditions of their native region which means less outside care and they provide numerous ecological benefits. Many traditional landscape plants are considered exotic. They have evolved in other parts of the world or were cultivated by humans into forms that do not exist in nature.² These exotics offer fewer benefits and occasionally become invasive destroying the native habitat.

DESIGNING A NATIVE PLANT GARDEN³

A **Naturalistic Design** seeks to emulate the habitat of a particular plant community. It allows a more random display of native grasses and forbs that are allowed to mingle with minimum Intervention.

Traditional Residential Landscapes are usually preferred by those who want more controlled growth and placement of plants. They require a more thoughtful design and more selective plant choices. Scott Woodbury, of Shaw Nature Preserve in Missouri, recommends a goal of 70% native plants to provide the maximum benefits to wildlife.

The Shawnee County Extension Native Garden is designed to display examples of both styles.

Things to Consider

Right plant, right place – Begin by examining your garden site. Consider how much light it gets, the type of soil and amount of soil moist you have. Next, select plants that will thrive in the environment your garden will provide.

Start with a blank canvas – If you are planning a new garden, you will have better success if you eliminate existing vegetation from the site. Young native plants will struggle if they must compete with tough perennial weeds, like bindweed, or are shaded out by other weeds, like crabgrass. It will also be more difficult to control unwanted vegetation if your new natives are nestled in amongst the weeds.

Consider scale and visibility – Planting the tallest plants in the rear of the garden cascading down to the shortest up front will give your garden a more orderly appearance and make it easier to see everything. Plants that are too big for your space will overwhelm it and detract from the flowers growing around them. Do not plant anything taller than half the garden's width.

Create year-round color and interest – Select plants that will flower in succession, so there will always be something in bloom in your garden. Many native plants have attractive seed-heads or dormant foliage that will add interest beyond the growing season.

Plant in groups or drifts - Planting your wildflowers in groups creates focal points in the garden and makes it easier for pollinators to locate nectar plants. Three to 4 species with a mixture of textures and planted in broad sweeping masses is attractive to both people and pollinators.

Define the garden space - A crisp edge, walkway or border looks neater and shows that the space is intentional.

“Sleep, creep, leap!” is an axiom well-known to native plant gardeners. Native plants can get off to a slow start. A rule of thumb to remember is that the first year the plants will sleep as they establish their deep root systems, the second year they creep as they begin to settle into their new home, but the third year they leap with plenty of vegetative growth and a profusion of blooms. Once your plants are established, they will require little care, except for an occasional thinning of the more aggressive species, but the first year or two you may need to mulch to suppress weed growth and water occasionally to keep their developing root systems from drying out.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON NATIVE PLANT GARDENING

Planting Natives in Northeast Kansas, <https://plantnativeks.weebly.com>
Kansas Native Plant Society, <https://www.kansasnativeplantsociety.org>
Grow Native!, <https://grownative.org>

^{1, 2} Native Plants, <https://www.nwf.org/Garden-for-Wildlife/About/Native-Plants>

³ Why Garden with Native Wildflowers?, https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/Native_Plant_Materials/Native_Gardening/index.shtml

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