# Native Plants 101

Many of us want to help bees and butterflies, conserve local water resources, or do something to address climate change locally. As more folks become mindful of the environment, there is a growing interest in gardening with native plants.

## What is a Native Plant?

Native plants support wildlife, conserve water, and capture carbon—but what exactly is a native plant? Our local native plants have adapted to the Illinois environment for thousands of years. As a result, they’ve become vital parts of the ecosystem. Our native plants form the foundation of the food web. For example, oak trees support 534 caterpillar species! In turn, those caterpillars are food for many local birds.

The plants that have lasted this long here know how to survive challenges that are specific to our region. Dry spells? Fires? Cold as heck winters? There’s a native plant for that. They’re not just able to survive--they’re able to thrive in these conditions. For example, prairie plants benefit from fires that clear out invasive species and restore nutrients to the soil. Also, many native seeds need the winter cold to sprout in the spring. While us Illinoisans grumble about how dang long winter is here, native plants are doing just fine and wouldn’t have it any other way.

## Benefits: Why Native Plants are Better

As the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold. For instance, most hydrangeas in gardens are not native. They glitter with showy flowers, but these flowers don’t contain any gold—meaning they’re sterile, containing no pollen and nectar for bees and butterflies. These non-native ornamental plants look nice, but are biologically unhelpful here.

Most of these ornamentals do nothing to support the local environment. Unfortunately, a few have a negative impact. For example, Japanese honeysuckle and Bradford pear have escaped yards and taken over most natural areas. They compete with our native trees and flowers for space, nutrients, and sunshine. Having no natural pests here, they often win.

If we want to help birds, butterflies, and other wildlife, we have to plant what they need for food and habitat—and that’s native flowers, grasses, and trees. Here are five reasons you should opt for native plants:

* Native plants feed and shelter bees, birds, butterflies, and other wildlife that need our help. With native landscaping, you help nature and get to delight in lovely views of butterflies and birds enjoying your yard.
* Native plants are easier to maintain. Once established, native plants hardly need to be watered. (They would benefit from a drink during dry spells, though!) Also, you won’t need fertilizer to keep native plants healthy.
* Native plants protect clean water in rivers, lakes, and groundwater. Deep-rooted native plants soak up and infiltrate stormwater into the soil. Pollutants like fertilizers and road salt filter out as they pass through the soil.
* Native plants are more sustainable. They are adapted to the Illinois climate and do better under stress.
* Native plants are not a compromise. You can have beautiful gardens planted with native flowers and trees. It just takes choosing the right plants for your space and landscape style.

## Choosing a Native Plant

Native plants are hardy, but not bulletproof. Like any living being, they have specific needs. Consider the sunlight, soil, and moisture of your garden space to choose a native plant that will thrive there. You might also want to place your plants in a way that looks pleasing to the eye. For a healthy and well-designed native plant garden, you can consider these questions when picking a plant:

* What sunlight, soil, and moisture conditions does this plant need to thrive?
* What wildlife does this plant attract?
* How big will the plant get? Is there enough space for the plant at its full size?
* What color are its flowers and when is it in bloom?
* Does this plant spread or stay contained? What maintenance will I need to do if I want a tidy garden?

## A Few Options for Your Native Garden

There are certainly native plants that are right for your space and preferences. Below are a few examples of native plants for your yard:

**Wild Ginger: Your New Native Groundcover**

This low-lying heart-shaped plant works great as a native groundcover and can help fill out shady spots.

Scientific name: Asarum canadensis

Conditions: Shade in well-drained but moist soil

**Butterfly Weed: Pollinator Paradise**

Butterfly weed has bright orange flower clusters that bloom June to August. It’s often abuzz with bees and butterflies who adore its pollen and nectar. It’s a kind of milkweed, which is the host plant for the monarch butterfly.

Scientific name: Asclepias tuberosa

Conditions: Full sun in dry to medium, well-drained soil

**Juneberry: A Berry Good Shrub**

Also called serviceberry, this shrub has fragrant white spring flowers that develop into berries in the late summer. The flowers attract pollinators, and the berries attract a variety of birds.

Scientific name: Amelanchier arborea

Conditions: Full sun to partial shade in medium soil

**Mighty Oaks: Keystone Species**

The oak tree is what’s called a keystone species: they support more wildlife than any other plant, and losing our oaks would have dire consequences on the ecosystem. If you can only do one thing to help local nature, planting an oak tree is a great choice. Illinois oak species include white oak, burr oak, red oak, pin oak, and swamp white oak.

Scientific name: Quercus spp.

Conditions: Varies depending on the species, which is good news—there’s likely an oak species that will work well in your yard!

Find many more options for your native plant garden using [Possibility Place’s Plant Finder](https://www.possibilityplace.com/plant-finder?search=&native%5B%5D=yes&flowers=All&fall=All) or [Morton Arboretum’s Tree Finder](https://mortonarb.org/plant-and-protect/search-trees-and-plants/).

It’s Not About Being Perfect

If you absolutely cannot part from your tulips or hostas, there’s no cause for concern. Obviously, we encourage you to prioritize native plants. A yard focused on natives will do the most to benefit the environment—but it doesn’t have to be 100% native. However, it is crucial to ditch the invasive plants that spread aggressively into natural areas. Honeysuckle, buckthorn, Bradford pear, and burning bush are examples of invasive plants that need to be removed.

## The Conservation Foundation Supports Your Native Plant Journey

The Conservation Foundation is your local conservation organization, and we fully support your move to transition your garden to native plants. In fact, we have a whole program dedicated to helping you do it!

Conservation@Home recognizes homeowners who make environmentally-friendly choices in their yard—by gardening with native plants, removing invasive species, installing rain barrels, and more. You can join the program at any time—whether you’re a complete beginner or a native plant pro. We can point you to resources, track down plants for your garden, and even walk your yard to give specific advice. With a little work, your home gardens will be eligible for certification as a Conservation@Home property. You’ll get a sign to proudly post in your yard and let your neighbors know that you are helping nature at home.

Added together, these Conservation@Home properties create corridors for wildlife to travel through, form buffers to protect rivers from polluted stormwater run-off, and capture carbon in deep roots and thick tree trunks. The more people that garden with native plants, the more we do to help the earth.

Learn more about Conservation@Home and native plant gardening at <https://www.theconservationfoundation.org/conservation-home/>