

Implementation Guide Series

Why Plant Native?

Inside:

When we think of symbols of America, our thoughts go to the flag, great mountain ranges, oceans, the bald eagle and plants. OK, so many of us don't think of plants, but we should. Plants can and do symbolize America, from the great Eastern forests of maples and the nearly extinct American Chestnut, to the Central plains with its compass plant, big bluestem, and bur oak, to the Western forests containing the oldest (bristle cone pine) and tallest (redwood) trees on earth. Images of these native-to-America plants are ingrained in our memory.



Native Naive about Natives?

Although native plants are defined differently by different people, for the purposes of this guide we will refer to native plants as those plants that were historically found within a specific ecological community prior to settlement. The information presented here pertains to native grasses and native wildflowers (forbs) of some of Iowa's ecological communities, including the tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, hardwood forests and wetlands. (Refer to the implementation guide **Finding and Selecting Native Plant Material** for more information on native species.)



Plants that have been brought into an area in which they are not considered to be native are termed exotic. When exotic plants are from other countries they are regarded as alien. Throughout history, humans have purposefully or accidentally introduced plant materials into areas that are beyond their natural range, where they are not native.

Any plant, native or exotic, that lacks its natural predators or competition may have a tendency to take over an area, becoming weedy or invasive. Weeds are simply plants out of place. They are any undesirable, uncultivated plant that crowds out a desired crop or grows where it is not wanted, whether that is a lawn, garden, farm field, natural area or native planting.

The Native Advantage

It doesn't matter where you live in this country, there are whole arrays of plants that are native to your home, and there are many reasons to consider using them in your plantings. The first has already been given: IT IS YOUR HERITAGE. These plants are part of the history of this land. Other reasons to plant native include: adaptability, reduced maintenance and beauty.

The first of these, adaptability, refers to the fact that native plants know your site. They have tolerated its extremes in temperature, wetness, dryness, and soil makeup for thousands of years and have developed mechanisms to deal with these variables. As a result of native plants' adaptability, the maintenance of the plantings can often be reduced. Consider, for example, a prairie plant that has developed in the Midwest. It does not die in the winter due to extreme cold, and it does not die in the summer from extreme heat and drought. Maintenance is reduced because it doesn't have to be covered in the winter to protect it from freezing and doesn't require additional water in the summer having adapted to these extreme conditions. In comparison, turf/lawn grass needs to be intensively managed to maintain its health and vigor. Maintenance reductions are realized simply by replacing grass with native plants. Once established, these areas no longer need to be mowed, watered, sprayed for weeds and pests, or fertilized. Given the cost savings in time and money it is hard to find a reason not to plant part or all of your landscape to natives.

Understandably early settlers in America used the plants they were accustomed to in their homeland, but the native plants have much to offer in terms of beauty in any landscape. Consider planting woodland wildflowers and sedges, which are beautiful and tolerate shade, where the typical homeowner tries to grow grass with limited success. Or plant a stately, strong bur oak in the back yard to be enjoyed for generations by both humans and wildlife. Our native plants offer us a multitude of colors, bloom times, shapes, sizes and growth rates, enough to fit nearly any landscape.



Forbs (Wildflowers)



Trees



Grasses

Native plants were present in an area before human settlement.

Native Plantings in Public and Private Spaces

Even though adaptability, maintenance and beauty are compelling reasons to plant natives, they often do not get considered for public plantings. This is due in large part to our unfamiliarity with them. Sadly, we are more familiar with plants foreign to America than those that are part of our heritage. But changes in attitude, knowledge and comfort are happening throughout the country and many more plantings are now including or consist totally of native plants. The question then, for those of us who wish to use these amazing plants in our landscapes, is how to incorporate them?

Much of the same information that is needed for any planting is also required for planting natives. Those responsible for the planting first must become familiar with what is native to the area. Obviously, different areas of the country, state, or even county have different types of native vegetation, so some research into what is native to your site is important. To find out what ecological communities, and the plants that comprised them, are native to your area, check out the following resources:

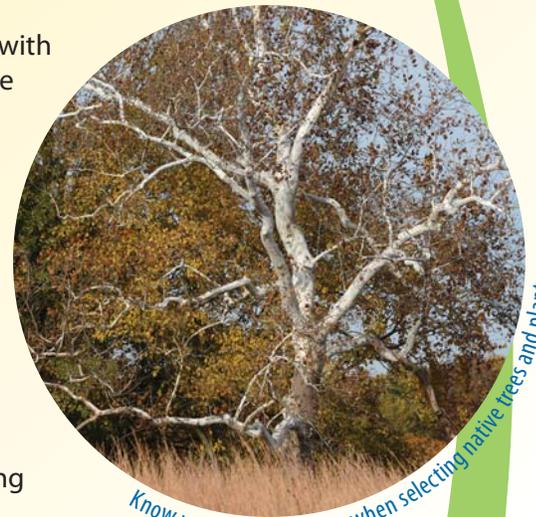
Eilers, L.J. and D.M. Roosa. 1994. *The Vascular Plants of Iowa: An annotated checklist and natural history*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa, USA. ISBN: 0-87745-464-7

Christiansen, P. and M. Müller. 1999. *An Illustrated Guide to Iowa Prairie Plants*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa, USA. ISBN: 0-87745-661-5

Packard, S. and C.F. Mutel (eds.). 1997. *The Tallgrass Prairie Restoration Handbook: for prairies, savannas and woodlands*. Society for Ecological Restoration, Island Press, Washington D.C., USA. ISBN: 1-55963-320-4

You also need to know your site before planting. The following is a list of some items to consider before planting:

- Locate utilities. Be sure to call Iowa One Call at 811 when planning the site.
- Consider views both good and bad. What areas need improvement or screening? What areas look fantastic and can be used as examples?
- Determine whether there might be site clearance/safety issues. Consult with the local DOT representatives if the planting is near a roadway. Make sure the plants you select won't grow too tall and become a traffic hazard.
- Consider the personality of the site. Should the planting look formal or have a more natural look?
- Determine the soil and moisture conditions. For example, ask questions such as whether the site stores snow. Does water pool after a rain? Is the soil sandy or spongy?
- Consider the hardiness zone. If selecting plants native to the site, this factor is already met.
- Think about the site location. Will the site receive heavy traffic? Is it exposed to strong winds? Is it shaded or in full sun? Is it a dry south-facing slope? Consider all of these things when choosing plants.



Know your site conditions when selecting native trees and plants.

If the above issues are taken into consideration, there will be places to use natives in every planting that you do, from a small foundation planting by your home to a community entryway or roadside planting. There are many great reasons to plant natives in your next landscape project and many great plants to choose from. So when that next project arises, strongly consider planting native at your home, along a roadway or a community entry. Definitely give natives a chance - they are our heritage! But changes in attitude, knowledge, and comfort are happening throughout the country and many more plantings are now including or consist totally of native plants.



About Trees Forever

Our mission – to plant and care for trees and the environment by empowering people, building community, and promoting stewardship – is fulfilled through cutting-edge programs and innovative practices. Through these, our trained and experienced staff has assisted community leaders and landowners across Iowa and Illinois with thousands of planting projects. Each year, on average, we work with and engage more than 7000 volunteers who give generously of their time and talents. To date, they have helped us plant more than 3 million trees and shrubs throughout Iowa and Illinois.