

“The Argument for Native Plants”

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Too often we overlook possibilities in our own backyards. An example is a popular gardening trend using native plants. A plant palette well-adapted to your site and conditions will reduce maintenance chores. In spite of fairly cool conditions, the Pacific Northwest is actually a “Mediterranean” climate. Summers can be bone dry. Because they evolved here, native plants are excellently adapted to our natural precipitation patterns, soils, seasonal temperature and light variations and wildlife.

But when is a plant native? Beware of “North American native” selections – a description which ignores the complexity of this continent. Even if a species is found over a wide range, selections from this region will be better adapted to our gardens. Generally we consider plants native if the species was found in the region when European explorers first arrived.

And they *are* beautiful. Gardeners all over the world grow plants from the Pacific Northwest as ornamentals. Many of our native plants bloom in spring and go into summer with seed heads and berries that can be quite attractive (and possibly tasty) such as evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), salal (*Gaultheria shallon*), and the Oregon grapes (*Mahonia* species). Vine maple trees (*Acer circinatum*) start autumnal leaf coloration in August or even July. Shrubs grown for spring floral effects include Philadelphus (Mock Orange), red-flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), and of course Pacific rhododendron (*Rhododendron macrophyllum*). And there are so many more.

An excellent starting place for more information is Arthur Kruckeberg’s *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest*. But even a native plant cannot be totally ignored. Gardeners should still pay attention to the needs of individual varieties. Native or not, shade lovers will not succeed in the blazing sun, for instance. New plantings do require irrigation until established, and are better planted in fall or early spring to take advantage of rainfall patterns. Appropriate pruning and “editing” improve health and appearance. Most native plants will thrive under this regimen and require less constant input than a more traditional garden. So give the natives another try!

Tag line (if there’s room) – *Want to be a master gardener? Training class starts in January. Call Kathy at 360-301-4938 for details!*