Cultivating Native Plants: The Possibilities

Susan Storer

According to some recent surveys, gardening has become the national pastime of Americans. Hand in hand with the increasing popularity of gardening has come a growing interest in native plants. More and more people are visiting the Garden in the Woods—which is the botanical garden of the New England Wild Flower Society (NEWFS) in Framingham, Massachusetts—to enjoy and to learn about the native plants of North America, for example. Every day the Garden receives numerous requests for information about native plants. The general public wants to know how to select wildflowers for specific situations, how to cultivate them successfully, and where to buy seeds and plants—as well as what to do when wild populations of special plants are threatened by development projects.

From professionals come different types of inquiries—conservation commissioners seek information about wetland species and their communities in order to deal with the sticky issues of wetland protection and replication, nurserymen seek economical methods of propagation and cultivation in order to respond to the increased demand for native plants in the landscape trade, and wildlife biologists look for information on the behavior of native plants under cultivation, in order successfully to manage populations or rare and endangered species in the wild. All these requests for information give a clear signal that there is great interest in the native flora.

Why Cultivate Native Plants?
At Garden in the Woods, growing native plants reflects the vision of its creator, Will C. Curtis. “It is a wildflower sanctuary in which wild plants will be grown, their likes and dislikes discovered, and the knowledge so gained eventually passed on in an effort to curb the wholesale destruction of our most beautiful natives. This is to be my contribution to conservation.” Promoting the conservation of native plants continues to be the main purpose of the Garden in the Woods.

The conservation message at the Garden in the Woods begins with the presentation of a garden of great beauty. The beauty and tranquility that visitors to the Garden encounter is a powerful way of gaining public interest and support for native plants. As a result, many visitors are inspired to include the native species in their own gardens. Perhaps they become interested in native species because of the great variety available for their gardens, or perhaps because of some deeper kind of interest in or connection with North American wildlings.

Native Species in the Home Garden
People are awakening to the potential for using native plants in the home garden. While the style of Garden in the Woods is naturalistic, native species can be used in any garden situation or landscape style, from naturalistic to very formal. In the garden, all plants have their strong and weak points regardless of
their origins—native or exotic, wild or cultivated. The notion that native species are somehow inferior to other garden plants, that they are ragged and weedy or fragile, is false. There are hundreds of garden-worthy native species that are versatile in cultivation and appropriate in a variety of settings.

Native plants combine well with exotic and cultivated species. Visitors to the Garden in the Woods are thrilled to see Japanese jack-in-the-pulpit, European ginger, and Chinese witch hazel growing alongside their North American cousins. Native species are also excellent companions, even for such familiar cultivated favorites as hosta, astilbe, and bleeding heart. The possibilities are endless.

Cultivating Native Plants
The basic culture of native plants is no different from that of any other plant. Some native species are very adaptable to a wide range of conditions, some are very specific in their requirements. In all cases, however, best results are achieved by choosing the right plant for the right place and by paying close attention to their soil, pH, moisture, and light requirements.

The best rule of thumb is to plant wildflowers in sites where conditions closely match those of their natural habitats. Woodland species are probably the best known natives in cultivation. Trilliums, hepaticas, wild ginger, bloodroot, and maidenhair fern all grow together in rich woodlands in the wild and also make a great combination, both culturally and aesthetically, for a shady garden site. Although not as well known as the woodland species, there are many sun-loving species from which to choose for sunny borders and meadow gardens.

All native species, to reach their full potential under cultivation, must be provided the same care and attention as any other garden plants. As long as you are gardening with native plants and not just naturalizing or managing plants in a natural setting, all the familiar tasks of fertilizing, mulching, pruning, watering, and weeding are necessary for success.

Propagating Native Plants
Closely associated with the cultivation of native species are the mysteries and intrigues of propagation. Home gardeners can participate in this activity without a large investment of materials and equipment. Propagation by seed, cuttings, and division are the main methods used at the Garden in the Woods. Many natives are easily propagated by one or more of these methods, either outdoors during the growing season or on a windowsill in the winter. For some species, propagation by seed is the easiest method, while for others, such as forms of certain species (albinos, doubles, compact varieties, etc.), vegetative
Aster novae-angliae, the New England aster. A spectacular fall-blooming species with color forms ranging from pink to deep purple, it does best in sunny spots.

propagation by cutting or division is a must because they usually do not come true from seed. While much work remains to be done to unravel mysteries, propagation techniques for many wild plants are well documented. Excellent resources are available to guide the home gardener in these techniques. Propagation is not only a fascinating and rewarding activity, but one that can provide a much wider variety of material than is readily available in the nursery trade.

Acquiring Native Plants
As the popularity of wildflowers has increased, so has the demand placed on the nursery industry to provide them. Since wild-collection is still the way in which many nurseries obtain their stock, by buying these plants for our own gardens, we may be contributing to their destruction in the wild.

Fortunately, there is a way both to enjoy native species in the garden and to conserve them in the wild: to propagate them. Before buying native plants from a nursery, the buyer should ask the nursery how it acquired its plants and buy only propagated material. Propagated plants have much healthier root systems than nonpropagated plants and generally survive handling, with much better long-term results. Many botanical gardens, native plant societies, and nurseries offer seed for sale to the home propagator. Through propagation, there is a great wealth to be gained in the garden and a great wealth to be preserved in the wild.

Bibliography

Cultivation
Available from the New England Wild Flower Society (NEWFS), Hemenway Road, Framingham, Massachusetts 01701, for $6.45, postpaid.


Propagation


General propagation notes; brief specific notes for 114 native plants; seed-collection dates for 93 wildflowers. Available by mail from the NEWFS for $5.45.


Sources of Native Plants

Lists sources of seeds and propagated plants of over 200 popular wildflowers for Zones 4, 5, and 6; 58 nurseries that sell wildflower seeds or propagated plants for Zones 4, 5, and 6; and other nurseries throughout the country that propagate native plants. (The 1987 edition will be available from the NEWFS in the summer of 1987.)


Available in late January of each year, the Seed List is sent free to members of the NEWFS. Nonmembers may obtain copies by sending a stamped (39¢), addressed long (No. 10) envelope for each copy to "Seeds," c/o NEWFS.

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