



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. 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. These exotics offer fewer benefits and occasionally become invasive destroying the native habitat. For more information on the importance of incorporating native plants, go to "[Plant Native](#)" from the National Wildlife Federation and "[Native Gardening](#)" from the USDA.

DESIGNING A NATIVE PLANT GARDEN

Determining if your goal is to increase wildlife and pollinator habitat or to incorporate hardier native wildflowers in your existing landscape will influence the type of design you create.

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 Plant Garden, located west of Dole Hall on the Washburn University campus is a combination of both styles. All the plants in the garden are native to northeast Kansas, with the exception of the garden's focal point, the '[Autumn Brilliance](#)' serviceberry (*Amelanchier* × *grandiflora*). This tree is an example of the compromise you may need to consider when the true native plant you desire is not readily available. This hybrid of our native downy serviceberry (*A. arborea*) and Allegheny serviceberry (*A. laevis*) was bred to provide a specimen with both a tree-like form and spectacular multi-seasonal interest. At times, you may wish to plant a variety of a native plant better suited to a particular need in your landscape. A good example is [Hydrangea arborescens](#) 'Annabelle', a naturally occurring cultivar of our native smooth hydrangea that is bred for its large, showier blooms and more compact form.

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

- **Right plant, right place** – Begin by examining your garden site. Consider how much light it gets, the type of soil, and amount of soil moisture you receive. 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 four 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 and perennial 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 less care, except for the 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://plantnativesks.weebly.com>
- Kansas Native Plant Society, <https://www.kansasnativeplantsociety.org>
- Grow Native!, <https://gownative.org>

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