



Gardeners are becoming increasingly aware of the impact their plots have on local ecosystems and are supporting biodiversity by adding native plants to their landscapes. These species are well-adapted to the conditions where they grow so they don't need much care and attention. Many native trees, shrubs, perennials, and grasses are as attractive as modern hybrids. And they liven up gardens by attracting a wide variety of birds, butterflies, and more. Including some native plants in your garden is an easy and rewarding way you can help preserve a healthy environment for all living things.

What is Native

The term "native" is used very broadly to refer to species that were growing in North America before the first European settlers arrived. For some experts, native plants include only those which have grown uncultivated within 100 miles of your garden. To help make this issue more understandable and consistent, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has defined 15 broad ecological regions that apply to different areas of the country. The mid-Atlantic states are in the Eastern Temperate Forest Ecoregion, according to the EPA map. Plants that have evolved in this ecoregion can be accurately called "natives."

Benefits of Native Plants

Food and shelter. Insects, reptiles and amphibians, birds, and other wildlife have evolved with native plants and depend on them for their needs. Monarch butterflies, for instance, feed only on native milkweed. By planting it in your garden, you are helping to protect the monarch population, which may be declining because they find less milkweed growing in uncultivated areas. Many other lesser-known species also depend on particular native plants.

No watering. Many native species have deep root systems that scavenge deep in the soil for the moisture they need. Those roots also open up pore spaces in the soil to absorb heavy rains, significantly reducing stormwater runoff and flooding.

No fertilizing. The deep root systems are able to extract the nutrients they need from the soil, so there's no need to feed native plants. Excess fertilizer washes out of the soil and into fresh water, where it can lead to algae blooms and other imbalances in the ecosystem.

Carbon control. Replacing lawns with native plants reduces the need for mowing, which keeps carbon from the burning of fossil fuels out of the atmosphere. Some native plants actually sequester carbon, capturing it from the air and storing it in the ground.

Plant Picks

You can choose from dozens of different native plants that grow in gardens in the mid-Atlantic region. More than 40 of them have earned PHS Gold Medal Awards, which are awarded annually to varieties that are attractive and well-suited to home landscapes. You can search through them all at phsonline.org/for-gardeners/gold-medal-plants.

A few native plants are particularly hard-working, according to Doug Tallamy, Ph.D., a professor at Delaware State University and an author of several books on landscaping with native plants. He has defined these species as "keystone plants" because of the critical role they play in supporting biodiversity.

White oak (*Quercus alba*). A large tree that can grow up to 60 feet tall or more, white oak has a stocky trunk with massive horizontal limbs that form an upright, rounded crown. It hosts up to 527 species of caterpillars, which in turn become food for dozens of other creatures. Planting an oak tree is an investment in the future, as it will live for decades.

River birch (*Betula nigra*). You can choose from several native birch species but this one is especially attractive. It is an upright, flowering tree with cinnamon-brown, exfoliating bark and yellow fall foliage. It can be managed as either a single trunk or multi-stemmed tree. The 'Fox Valley' variety earned a PHS Gold Medal Award.

American plum (*Prunus americana*). This fast growing, 15-to-25-foot-tall tree blooms with clusters of white flowers in early spring. The tart fruit is small with red skin and yellow pulp. Birds such as cedar waxwings, cardinals, and sapsuckers feed on the plums while swallowtail and hairstreak butterflies seek the flowers' nectar.





Plant Picks cont.

American pussy willow (*Salix discolor*). Most often grown as a large multi-stemmed shrub that reaches 6 to 12 feet tall, American pussy willows produce a showy display of pearl gray, silky catkins in early spring. They are especially valuable for the first native bees to emerge from dormancy when winter ends.

Oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*). If you like the widely grown bigleaf or panicle hydrangeas, consider planting one of these natives instead. It's an upright, multi-stemmed, deciduous shrub that typically grows 4 to 6 feet tall. Its large clusters of white flowers in summer attract attention from people as well as many pollinators. 'Snow Queen' is a Gold Medal Award winning variety.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*). This native member of the holly family is a slow-growing, deciduous shrub that typically tops out at 8 to 12 feet tall. It produces bright red berries in late summer to fall that often persist throughout the winter. The fruit is a valuable food source for both migrating and resident bird populations. The PHS Gold Medal Award evaluators singled out the 'Red Sprite' variety for its beauty and garden performance.

Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*). A densely branched, deciduous shrub, summersweet typically grows to 3 to 6 feet tall. It bears sweetly fragrant white flowers which appear in narrow, upright panicles in mid to late summer. Look for 'Ruby Spice' or 'Hummingbird' varieties, which have earned PHS Gold Medal Awards.

Goldenrod (*Solidago altissima*). Once considered an unwelcome weed, goldenrod deserves a spot in home landscapes because it supports more than 40 species of specialist native bees. Its feathery, plume-shaped yellow flowers open at the end of the 2 to 4 feet tall stems.

Common Blue Violets (*Viola spp.*). Chances are you've seen these low-growing perennial purple, pink or speckled flowers in lawns in the spring. You can grow them as a groundcover in place of turfgrass. Violets are versatile, thriving in full sun to part shade and just about type of soil. Deer don't eat them, but they are the larval host plant for Great Spangled Fritillary butterflies and attract many pollinators.

Avoid Invasives!

Even if you have few or no native plants in your landscape, be sure to avoid planting invasive species that spread aggressively from gardens to woodlands and other uncultivated spaces. **Burning bush** (*Euonymus alatus*), **Privet** (*Privet spp*), **Japanese barberry** (*Berberis thunbergia*), and **Butterfly bush** (*Buddleja davidii*) are widely sold in nurseries and garden centers because they all appear to be well-behaved in home gardens. They are, however, increasingly found beyond residential landscapes and should not be planted. There are many others still sold in nurseries. Check the USDA's comprehensive database of invasive plants before you purchase any non-native species.

LEARN MORE

[PHS McLean Library Native Plants of Pennsylvania Subject Guide](#)

[PHS Gold Medal Plants Database](#)

[Rutgers Cooperative Extension: Incorporating Native Plants in Your Residential Landscape](#)

[Pennsylvania Native Plant Society](#)

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