

Landscaping with Native Plants

Photos courtesy of MGs Margie Jenke, Herman Auer and Kathleen Crabb



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In the past few months, I have become interested in the promotion of native plants in our landscapes to aide pollinators, wildlife, and conservation. I hope this article will interest you to venture into using native plants in your home landscape.

Lady Bird Johnson once asked "Why can't Texas look like Texas?" Thus, her Texas wildflower projects. So, to be more precise, why can't the Texas Gulf Coast look like itself with coastal native plants?

What is a native plant, anyway? They are the plants that were here when the settlers arrived. The settlers brought their own favorites to Texas and those plants have adapted to our environment. We all have our favorite plants that we enjoy in our gardens. I am not saying to use only native plants. However, I hope you will want to incorporate them into your gardens. If you try 'em, I am pretty sure you will like 'em! Native plants in our Zone 9 and Zone 10 growing region are naturally adapted to our growing conditions. They are low maintenance, conserve water, are winter hardy, and can stand our summer heat. They will grow in our varied soil types.

Conserving water is a concern today. Only 1% of the water on Earth is available for our use (for drinking, irrigation, and other purposes) and we can't afford to waste it. Xeriscape gardening, dry gardening, is a perfect concept for native plants that require less water. Coastal natives are hardy and adapted to both dry and wet conditions. I didn't lose any native plants during Harvey, but my non-native eucalyptus tree bit the dust.

I took a tour of my garden after the recent freezes. Non-natives that I didn't cover were damaged. They get fooled by our mild winters and break winter dormancy and put out spring growth early. Natives are smarter and break winter dormancy later.

Recently, I heard Lauren Simpson's program on "Gardening for Wildlife in Your Own Backyard." She said the average neighborhood yard looks pretty, but doesn't support the range of wildlife crucial to a healthy community environment.



Goldenrod



Gayfeather
(*Liatris scariosa*)



Mexican Hat



Wine Cups



Bluebonnet



Bitterweed



Firewheel



Texas Coneflower

Mrs. Simpson's promotion of a wildlife habitat for pollinators such as birds and insects (including butterflies, bees and other beneficials) stresses the need for native plants in our gardens.

Native plant gardeners also collect seeds to share with others. Mrs. Simpson provided seeds from her native garden habitat in Houston. This fall I planted Goldenrod (*Solidago altissima*), Gayfeather (*Liatris* spp.), Mexican Hat (*Ratibida columnifera*), Winecup (*Callirhoe* sp.), and Bluebonnets (*Lupinus texensis*). In the spring, I will plant Bitter Sneezeweed (*Helenium amarum*), Firewheel (*Gaillardia pulchella*), Texas Coneflower (*Rudbeckia texana*), Lanceleaf Coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) and Texas Coneflower (*Redbeckia texana*).

I also grow host plants for a variety of butterflies including native and tropical milkweed for the Monarch butterflies, Passion-flower for the Gulf Fritillary butterflies and Pipe-vine varieties for the swallowtails. Native plants are the nectar plants for the pollinators and many native plants produce berries for the birds.

In the past, the idea of landscaping with native plants was just an idea. Home gardeners found it difficult to find a native plant list or a plan about how to landscape their gardens with natives. Nurseries did not sell native plants and were of little or no help. Fortunately, nurseries like Joshua's and Buchanan's Native Plants in Houston and other nurseries are getting on the bandwagon. An excellent and informative book by Sally and Andy Wasowski, *Native Texas Plants Landscaping* would make a terrific addition for your gardening library.

Today, the Native Plant Society of Texas (<http://npsot.org>) has local chapters and monthly meetings. They provide field trips, plant/seed swaps and wildscape workshops. A Native Landscape Certification Program is offered to familiarize you with our Texas ecoregion and soil types. You will learn to create a native landscape design for your garden and identify native plants of choice. Locally there is a Clear Lake chapter meeting at the University of Houston at Clear Lake. There are also Houston Chapter meetings conducted at the Houston Arboretum.