Native plants are beautiful and beneficial

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, UK Department of Horticulture

You may have heard a lot about native plants lately, and you might be wondering, what’s the big deal? Will planting them in my garden really make a difference?

Using native plants in your landscape not only can give you three-season bloom and make your garden stand out from others in your neighborhood, there’s a positive domino effect to planting them as well. Birds and other wildlife depend on the insects that native plants support. According to the National Audubon Society, a native oak tree can be home to 500 species of caterpillars, while ginkgos, which originated in Asia, host only five. When a chickadee needs more than 6,000 caterpillars to raise a single brood, you can see the importance of natives to wildlife. Incorporating native flowers near your vegetable garden may attract pollinators and other beneficial insects.

Here are some wildflowers that would add beauty to your yard, as well as provide habitat and food for wildlife. Like most flowers, they will be especially eye-catching when planted in masses.

Geranium maculatum or wild geranium. Sometimes referred to as cranesbill, wild geranium is easy to grow and is a good plant for a variety of light and soil conditions. Thriving in full sun and well-drained soils, it is also perfectly happy in dry shade. This hardy, clump-forming perennial blooms in April to May and will occasionally rebloom in the fall. Butterflies love it, but deer and rabbits do not, so we chalk up a win-win in that category.

Monarda didyma. This member of the mint family is known by many names. People used to use its resin to calm bee stings, thus its common name, bee balm. It’s also known as Oswego tea because Native Americans in New York state used its leaves in that manner, and its leaves are still used today for teas and salads. Some people call it wild bergamot, because its scent bears a similarity to the bergamot orange.

In its native habitat, monarda can be found in bottomlands, along streambanks and in moist, open woods. It will be happy in full sun to part-shade, particularly afternoon shade in hot regions and evenly moist soil. Deadhead the blooms to encourage a longer bloom time, which begins in June and may last through July into August. Monarda is exceptional in attracting pollinators and hummingbirds are drawn to its red flowers. It can be a bit aggressive in the landscape, and controlling its spread can require effort.

Physostegia virginiana, commonly known as false dragonhead or obedient plant, is a beautiful plant for the back of a garden, though its 3- to 4-foot stems tend to flop, so you may need to stake them. Its spiky, pink or white blooms bear a slight resemblance to the snapdragon and attract hummingbirds and butterflies. They make a good cut flower. False dragonhead prefers full- to part-sun and a well-drained soil and may be difficult to contain in an ideal environment. The plant blooms from June to September. It also is called obedient plant because flowers that are repositioned on the stem will temporarily hold that position.

Echinacea purpurea. Purple coneflower’s daisy-like flowers with prominent centers, support insects and birds alike. They attract bees and butterflies, and if you leave the seed heads on late in the season, small finches will feast on their seeds over the winter. They prefer full sun for the best bloom, which starts in July and often continues through September. However, they will still produce flowers in part sun. Tall, with strong stalks, they work beautifully in the back of a garden.

For more information about native plants, check out the extension publications Wild About Wildflowers, http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/for/for71/for71.pdf, Attracting Butterflies with Native Plants, http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/for/for98/for98.pdf and Native Plant Landscaping of Septic Systems, http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/HENV/HENV508/HENV508.pdf. You can also contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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