

THE BETTER CHOICE: NATIVE PLANTS

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

Have you been doing your Aunt Rachel walks this spring? When I was growing up, our family often made a four-hour trip to visit my mother's family near the West Virginia-Ohio border. On every visit, my great-aunt Rachel, beaming with delight, would coax us into her yard to see what was just starting to grow, how certain vegetables had proliferated, to admire a flower that had just started blooming, or to contemplate a mystery plant that had popped up. She and my grandmother loved gardening. Many of their plants came from heirloom seeds saved every season for planting the next or cuttings and transplants passed along by one gardener to another. My mother and I did the same for years, and whether inspecting a friend's garden, or our own, we came to call them our "Aunt Rachel walks."

In the past few weeks on my own perambulations around our yard, I have seen many signs of spring. In the shade, ostrich ferns are raising their tight knobby fists; soon, stiff brown fronds will poke out and green as they reach toward the light. Hostas and the early bloomers, such as snow drops and crocuses, are showing bright spots of color. In sunny spots, lots of perennials are beginning to pop up. Forsythias are starting to bloom; rhododendron, lilacs, and azaleas have fat buds that in a few more weeks will burst open in delicate hues of pinks, lavenders, and white. Even the trees promise a glorious spring, some, such as the tulip magnolia and dogwood, with plump buds slowly unfurling; oak and maple opening up spidery, tiny leaves of yellow-green and red.

This spring promises to be a busy one, too, as a corner backyard area where we once had lots of shade from two 40-year-old-plus Norwegian spruces is now an open, sunny area. Most of the area was planted in sod last fall, but we've left four-feet-deep beds along the two sides of our property for new plantings.

Shrubs? Trees? Perennials? A combination of all three? The one thing I know for sure is that I'll be choosing native plants.

What's the big deal with native plants, you ask. Well, native plants are needed to attract native insects, birds, and other animals—the plants provide nectar, pollen, and seeds that these creatures need and that they have been thriving on for thousands of years, if not longer, in our area. Non-natives are kind of like being on a diet of sweets without any of the nutritious ingredients provided by vegetables, fruits, and proteins.

And just as we have a healthier, more productive body when we eat the things that are good for us, so do pollinators when they eat the foods that they've been accustomed to for millennia. Unfortunately, the non-natives we plant are newer introductions and "do not provide energetic rewards for [pollinators] and often require insect pest control to survive," according to the U.S. Federal Forestry Service. On the other hand, with natives, you usually don't have to fertilize, use pesticides, or water as frequently as you do non-native cultivars. And in a native plantscape, you may not even have to mow.

Besides providing shelter and food for wildlife, native plants reduce air pollution, since they take in carbon from the air. Their "deep root systems...increase the soil's capacity to store water [and help prevent erosion.] Native plants can significantly reduce water runoff and, consequently, flooding," the Forestry Service states. Finally, natives promote biodiversity and stewardship of the land.

So, what are your choices for native plants in the mid-Atlantic? First, you need to determine the soil conditions, hours of sun or shade, and what you want the plant to do. In our back corner, where those trees were downed, we need something tall and probably somewhat dense (trees/shrubs) to act as a windbreak and a privacy screen. Since it's an area we constantly view from our family room, we would like the new plants to provide some seasonal color, some winter interest, and to attract birds/butterflies, and other insects (again, trees or shrubs; but also, perennials). I'm cautious about scent now; I once had a hellebore that was lovely for a couple of seasons, but as it aged, it began to exude a horrible, dead-animal smell; the same thing was true of a mountain ash—as it aged, its flowers gave off a nasty scent in the spring.

Finally, we don't want something that will spread via roots or rhizomes into the adjacent yards or into the sodded area of our own yard. And that's the problem with lots of non-natives: they turn into invasives and tend to have a longer growth period than natives, putting leaves out earlier in spring and dropping them later in the fall. Plus, they have no natural enemies; most don't taste good to deer, nor do they as easily attract insects.

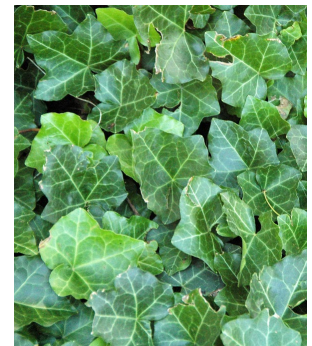
If you have invasives or non-natives that you want to replace, think about what characteristic(s) that non-native has that you like so much. Is it the fragrant scent of its flowers? Showy blooms or leaves? Height or width? A vine?

For more information about invasives and native plants, you might want to check websites for the University of Maryland Extension Service, the Maryland Invasive Species Council, the National Invasive Species Information Center, and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Below are just a few of the more popular non-natives and some of the native plant alternatives you might consider (you'll probably find other alternatives when you do an Internet search).



Japanese wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda*) is often planted for its showy flowers and fragrance. Native plant alternatives include woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricatus*), sweet azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*), coast azalea (*Rhododendron atlanticum*), or American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*). American wisteria differs from the Japanese in that the American version has smooth seedpods; blooms are shorter, rounder, and more compact; and it is more cold-tolerant. Beware, though: while the American species is not as invasive, you still will have to prune suckers and cut back wandering branches. Train it to a trellis for best results.

English ivy (*Hedera helix*) is often planted because it is a drought-tolerant evergreen. However, it spreads by runners, and birds spread the seeds, making it very invasive, whether on your property or someone else's. Once established, it's hard to get rid of (I've been fighting with an old patch for several years). The vines can cover trees so densely that the latter get no sun and eventually die. Its density on the ground can keep soil soggy, encouraging mosquitoes to breed. Some of the better alternatives include plantain-leaved sedge (*Carex plantaginea*), marginal woodfern (*Dryopteris marginalis*), woodland aster (*Eurybia divaricatus*), creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*), and Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*).



Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) was very popular years ago because it was inexpensive and sported edible but tart fruit. It easily escapes gardens and grows densely in both full sun and deep shade. Among several native alternatives are strawberry bush (*Euonymus americanus*), shrubby St. Johnswort (*Hypericum prolificum*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillate*), and mapleleaf viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*).

The invasive **purple loosestrife** (*Lythrum salicaria*) has been very popular because of its long blooming season and because it is wet-tolerant. It is best replaced now by swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*, which will attract monarch butterflies), sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*), grass-leaved blazing star (*Liatris pilosa*), or New York ironweed (*Vernonia novaboracensis*).



Burning bush is considered invasive in 21 states. Favored for its deep red fall color, it can be replaced with other colorful plants such as fringed bluestar (*Amsonia ciliata*), witch-alder (*Fothergilla gardenia*), oak-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), or something in the Viburnum family, such as swamp haw (*Viburnum dentatum*) or arrow-wood viburnum (*Viburnum nudum*). I must admit, though, we have a burning bush, which has not been invasive, nor has it produced baby plants in the more than 30 years we've had it.

The annual Master Gardeners' plant sale is back on! When you are searching for native plants locally, plan to visit our sale on Saturday, April 23, at the Frederick Fairgrounds, from 9:00 to 2:00.

You should know that Frederick County Master Gardener seminars and other activities—except those held outdoors or at locations other than the Extension Office—are still cancelled until further notice. In the meantime, you can find gardening information and advice online at: the University of Maryland Extension Home and Garden Information Center or our Frederick County Master Gardeners' Facebook page. In addition, you can call us at 301-600-1596, [our local UMD extension office](#).

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

Find us on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>

University programs, activities, and facilities are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, personal appearance, or any other legally protected class.