

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: How do I take care of native plants?**

A: One of the advantages of using plants that evolved in this area is that they are adapted to the local conditions and need little care if they are planted in appropriate sites. Follow these simple guidelines:

- Water the plants until they get established (typically the first year for perennials and shrubs and 2-3 years for trees. Consult your professional for details about specific plants.) After that, supplemental watering should be unnecessary.
- Do NOT apply fertilizer. Fallen leaves or a light application of mulch provide plenty of nutrients.
- Do NOT apply pesticides.
- Pruning is not required but may be done on certain plants if desired. Ask your professional.

### **Q: Don't native plants attract bees? We don't want anything to endanger our residents**

A: Flowering plants attract native bees with their beautiful colors and blooms. Native bees are there intent on getting the nectar and taking it back to their young in nesting holes in trees or in the ground away from their food source. These bees are overwhelmingly solitary bees and not aggressive. The storied yellowjackets, wasps and hornets certainly do attack if their nests are threatened, and luckily their nests are not likely to be in a flowerbed but up in trees, eaves of buildings or in untrampled wooded areas.

Having said that, there is no need to scare people who may be unfamiliar with these facts. It is easy enough to set plants that attract bees back from the walkways.

### **Q: I like neat beds and borders. I've seen native plants and they are weedy and messy looking.**

A: Native plants come in many shapes, sizes and growing habits, some compact and well-behaved and some wonderfully ebullient. A good design can bring out the best in them. It is perfectly possible to create a formal design using only native plants. The majority of garden weeds, by the way, are not native but rather invasive plants that were introduced.

In addition to choosing the right plants for your specific site, consider these [Cues to Care](#) in your garden design. Check our online [plant search app](#) to identify more neat-and-tidy

looking plants, or look in our [website section for professionals](#) for lists of plants suitable for conventional landscaping settings.

**Q: We need easy maintenance landscaping to keep our annual costs down. How do native plants compare to conventional plantings?**

A: Because they evolved to succeed in our area, native plants generally require less maintenance than non-native exotic plants - less water, no fertilizer but some organic matter when planted, and no pesticides. Native plants and native insects attain a balance in a healthy habitat and that works for us.

**Q: Our HOA landscaping is part of our marketing plan. Our common areas and entrance must look spectacular. Can native plants give us the look we want?**

A: Native plants are up to the task. To meet your design standards you may want to consult a professional landscape designer. You can find a list of designers specializing in design with native plants on the PNN website here.

<https://www.plantnovanatives.org/landscaping-help>. If you already have a designer but they aren't experienced with native plants they can find helpful information on our [Professionals section of our website](#).

**Q: Are there enough landscaping contractors who know native plants, can design with them and maintain them?**

A: Our website includes a list of landscape designers who specialize in native plants and another one of landscape maintenance companies that self-identify as having expertise in native plants and naturalized landscapes.

We are reaching out to grow the number of professionals working with native plants with the first of a series of [conferences for landscape professionals](#).

See our [landscape maintenance page](#) for important practices for maintaining native gardens.

**Q: Are native plants available at nurseries?**

A: A very wide selection is available. Conventional nurseries all carry them, some more than others. [Many of them](#) have made it easy to identify the Virginia natives by allowing Plant NOVA Native volunteers to put red stickers on their signs or pots. Plus there are several [native plant only nurseries](#) in Northern Virginia.

**Q: They say many non-native plants like Japanese Barberry and Burning Bush are invasive, but I have never seen them spread in my yard.**

A: You may not see it happening in your yard because the seeds are carried to other places, but what you plant has a big impact on the surrounding areas. A couple hours volunteering in a local park will quickly show you the extent of the problem. These cultivated exotic plants ([and many others](#)) have been found to escape their landscaped yards through the actions of birds, other wildlife, wind, water and the inappropriate disposal of yard waste in natural areas. They are successful exotic invasives because they have no check on their growth by native insects and wildlife and because, sadly, many of them are still sold in local nurseries without warnings and educational material. The natural areas of Northern Virginia are being steadily degraded because of our landscaping practices. Please do not add to the problem by growing these plants on your property.

**Q: Butterflies love my Butterfly Bush. What's wrong with that?**

While non-native butterfly bush supplies nectar to some adult butterflies, their native counterparts can feed all stages of the butterfly life cycle. Adult butterflies lay their eggs on the native host plant and their caterpillars feed on the leaves. In turn, the lepidoptera caterpillars are critically important food to birds and other wildlife. And once the blooming is over, most native plants provide seeds or berries adding to their wildlife value. Butterfly bush also carries a warning from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service that it may be invasive, and indeed, it has been starting to invade in Northern Virginia. If you want to attract certain species of butterflies to your garden, learn their favored host plant(s) and plant that instead of butterfly bush junk food.

**Q: I am already feeding the birds and see plenty at my feeders.**

A: Bird seed is great for attracting adult birds whether they are residents or just migrating through. But the baby birds must eat insects, primarily caterpillars, and insects depend on the plants with which they evolved, meaning native plants. If your neighborhood can't supply those caterpillars, songbirds will not succeed in raising their young. Also, the berries of introduced plants are often too high in sugar and low in fat – Asian birds have different nutritional requirements, for example - whereas the berries of native plants have what it takes to support migrating birds in our country.

**Q: Your literature recommends we not use pesticides and get rid of invasive plants like English ivy. We have mosquitoes so need to spray, and we love the English ivy ground cover we have.**

A: The practice of spraying yards for mosquitoes is very unfortunate. The pesticides used are broad spectrum insecticides and kill all insects they contact including the caterpillars that are food for birds and other wildlife.

Mosquitoes are best controlled by removing standing water where they breed and encouraging biodiversity so mosquitoes natural predators can control them. Learn more here <https://www.plantnovanatives.org/dealing-with-insects>.

English ivy creates an exclusive dark, damp environment of moist and rotting tree bark keeping out air and other plants. This climbing evergreen damages the bark of trees, holds rainwater, ice and snow and brings down large mature trees. For all this impact it contributes nothing to biodiversity. Here are many native groundcover choices that increase biodiversity and don't damage trees:

<https://www.plantnovanatives.org/groundcovers>.

**Q: We do not want to attract snakes.**

A: Snakes are no more attracted to native plants than to foreign ones, though they do take shelter in dense vegetation. They are an invaluable part of our ecosystem, keeping down the population of rodents including the mice that carry Lyme disease. When doing any sort of work in your garden, it makes sense to avoid putting your hands or feet in places where you can't see. Snakes will not jump out of their hiding places to bite you, so you can avoid them for the most part by watching your step and by making pathways wide enough. If that is not possible, trim back any tall grass for a couple feet along the side.