

Native Plant Shopping Tips

Shopping for plants is often the best part of gardening! When it comes to native plant shopping, being aware of some common pitfalls can save you time and confusion. We've compiled some tips and advice to help you navigate the nursery aisles with confidence – to find the right plants while avoiding mixups, lookalikes, and those that don't quite measure up.

Come Prepared

Box stores and regular nurseries carry a great number of mostly non-native plants. Employees are generally not trained to answer detailed questions or give ecologically sound advice. Do a little research ahead of time. Make a list of target species, be prepared to use your smartphone, and trust yourself to make informed choices.

Ask “Native to Where?”

Many nurseries use the term “native” loosely – plants labeled as native may only be native to somewhere in North America, not to our region. We recommend using [BONAP](#) or [Go Botany](#) to check if a species is native to our region.

Visit a Native Plant Nursery (If You Can)

Native plant nurseries are well worth the drive. You'll find a broader, more ecologically appropriate selection, and the staff are more likely to understand your goals and offer good advice.

Use Species Names

Common names are very often unreliable – the same name may refer to completely different plants, or to plant groups that include both native and non-native species. Take “viburnum” for example. There are many species and hybrids of viburnum in the trade, some native and some non-native. Species names, like *Viburnum dentatum* (an Ecoregion 59 native), are precise and universal. They may be intimidating at first, but using them helps you avoid lookalikes and mixups.

Watch Out for Hybrids

Hybrids are crosses between different species – often between a North American and an Asian species. They should not be confused with native species. Look for an “x” in the name as a clue – for example, *Agastache* x ‘*Blue Fortune*’ is a hybrid. The “x” may be omitted, so if you see a genus name only, that's also an indication that the plant is a hybrid. A large percentage of widely sold cultivars are hybrids.

Be Choosy About Cultivars

Cultivars are plants that have been selected to be more useful in a garden setting. However, deviations from wild forms can reduce a plant's value to wildlife. Avoid cultivars with red or purple foliage, or double or sterile flowers. Look for those that closely resemble the wild type, differing only in size or improved disease resistance.

Try Growing From Seed

Many native plants are surprisingly easy to grow from seed. Growing seeds preserves genetic diversity and supports resilient, locally adapted plants. It's also a very affordable way to grow your garden over time.

Final Notes

Don't let the learning curve discourage you – gardening with native plants is a highly rewarding journey, and every step increases the ecological value of your garden. The more you learn, the easier it gets, and there are great information resources out there to help you along the way!