

Landscaping With Native Plant



Virgin's Bower



Fernbush



New Mexican Locust

By Cindy Murray

Over the last couple of decades, Master Gardeners across the United States have been increasingly advising homeowners and landscape artists to employ native plants in their landscaping endeavors. When my husband and I bought our home here in the Flagstaff area eighteen years ago, our real estate agent encouraged us to do so, saying, "In this harsh environment you may benefit by landscaping with plants native to the region. I think you can find some at Flagstaff nurseries, and The Arboretum has a plant sale every summer."

To be frank, we had never heard of native plants for sale at nurseries, but we soon became regular customers. If we don't have a particular plant in mind when we arrive, we ask where their native plant section is located, so we can browse. If we do know what we want, we call ahead to see if the nursery carries it. And of course, the plant sales hosted at *The Arb* are marvelous, offering a variety of native species.

So, what are the benefits of "planting native?" For Hugh and me the biggest incentive is that they have had significantly better survival rates. This makes sense when you contemplate the thousands of years that plants native (endemic) to northern Arizona have evolved harmoniously with various soils, changing climate, and other evolving organisms of the region. We also find that native plants are attractive.

One of our first landscaping projects was to remove invasive horehound in our front yard and replace it with blue grama grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*), a perennial bunchgrass native to many Arizona highlands in forest clearings and grasslands. Although blue grama is fairly drought-tolerant, we irrigate it during droughty spells in the spring and fall. Initially, we made the mistake of not preparing the soil adequately, but now, a few years later, it acts as a low-maintenance, serene, grassy meadow dotted with wildflowers, which we mow two or three times a year.

Next, we added shade trees attractive to both humans and wildlife: ponderosa pines, Colorado blue spruces, a New Mexico locust, pinyon pines and a big tooth maple. Although the cottonwood and seven aspens on the property here before us require more water than our other trees, they have served handsomely as wind breaks so essential to our Timberline environs.

When it came to purchasing native shrubs, I went overboard. I bought about twenty and directed Hugh to plant them fairly close together on sectors of the property accessible with a one-hundred-foot hose. (Even native plants need irrigation during dry periods for the first few years.) I made the mistake of not accounting for how large native shrubs would eventually become. Some of them soon grew as tall and wide as small trees. Sad to say, we eventually had to remove some lovely bushes so the remainder would not be competing for nutrients, sunshine, and water. Native shrubs that I find especially unique and appealing include smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), fernbush (*Chamaebatiaria millefolium*), Wood's rose (*Rosa woodsii* and *R. fenderli*), and false indigo bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*).

With the exception of shrubs and trees, perennials are plants that live for more than two years, and our region abounds with them. When Mexican hats (*Ratibida columnaris*) are planted en masse, they create a showcase of red- and yellow-rayed blossoms with a conical disc in the center of each. My Mexican hats are thriving in our least-fertile, most stone-ridden, driest patches of the property. Palmer's penstemon (*P. palmeri*) is my favorite perennial, gracing

multiple locales in our yard with fragrant, pale pink, bulbous blooms on tall stalks in early summer.

I would be remiss if I didn't include a snapshot of two splendid Northern Arizonan vines. Western Virgin's Bower (*Clematis ligusticifolia*) is dioecious, meaning that male and female flowers reside on separate plants. The female forms masses of lovely cottony seedheads, remaining on the vine through fall. Arizona grape (*Vitis arizonica*) is also dioecious, with our four specimens creeping up and over the length of our western fence, lending our backyard an ambience of verdant tranquility.

Here are some additional practical aspects to planting native species: they rarely need fertilizing; many save water; they restore our natural surroundings; some control erosion; they offer nutrient-rich pollen, nectar, and fodder to native bees and/or wildlife; they reduce runoff; and they preserve biodiversity. Pretty impressive, wouldn't you say?

I hope you are now considering how native species may work in your yard. Happy native planting!

Cindy Murray is a biologist and coeditor of Gardening Etc. and has been a County Master Gardener since 2010. She enjoys photographing Arizona's great outdoors, especially sunsets, birds, and insects. She is a member of Arbor Day Foundation, Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, and The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. She would like to thank Lisa Miller for editing Cindy's articles for this column.