

COLUMNISTS

Want to go native in your West Texas landscape?

Jan Carrington Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT Oct. 11, 2020

One of the more significant landscaping developments these days is the trend toward designing with native plants. But, what are native plants? Non-natives? Invasives? How do these differ? What are the benefits of native plants to us and our ecosystem?

Native plants are plants that occur naturally in the region in which they evolved. They form the foundation of an area's ecology, including its animals, birds, insects and people. These plants were here before settlers arrived, rather than being brought by settlers.

Good examples of local native plants include trees like Desert Willow, Hackberry, Live Oak and Red Oak; flowers like Autumn Sage, Mealy Blue Sage and Golden Crownbeard; and groundcovers like Frogfruit.

Non-natives, on the other hand, are plants that have been "brought in" to an area, without having evolved there. This can happen by design or by accident. When early settlers came to America, they brought many plants with them for their herb and medicinal gardens, or for the comfort of seeing something familiar from the old world. Many of these plants are common now, and work fine in our landscapes, even though they are not considered to be native. Some examples are fennel, petunias and crepe myrtles.

Unfortunately, non-natives did not evolve alongside native wildlife. They do not always offer the pollen, nectar and food sources needed to ensure the local ecosystem will thrive.

Invasive plants are non-natives that "get away." They arrive here by design (imported) or by accident (on the wind, on a boat, by animal, etc.). They reproduce quickly and spread aggressively. They damage the natural food web, clog up streams and lakes, overtake rangeland, crowd native trees and shrubs out of woodlands and can cause serious harm to the natural environment. They are also quite expensive to eradicate. Some examples of these are Kudzu, Water Hyacinth and Salt Cedar/Tamarisk trees.

Given these definitions, it seems logical to grow native plants. But it hasn't always been easy to find commercially grown natives in nurseries and garden centers. Many nurseries tend to sell horticultural species that may be quite hybridized or that are not well-adapted to the hot and dry summers in the Big Country. This is changing with the growing awareness of the many benefits of "Going Native."

What are some of these benefits?

Native plants are more drought resistant. They save money by needing less water.

Native plants are hardy enough to tolerate our hot and cold temperatures.

They are more resistant to disease and pests, so don't require pesticides and chemicals to survive, saving even more money.

Native plants help control erosion due to deeper and more varied root systems. They are better adapted to an area's soil conditions so chemical fertilizers are not necessary.

They attract birds and insects, especially butterflies, native bees and hummingbirds, because they provide food and shelter for a variety of species.

They contribute to biodiversity, ensuring a healthy ecosystem for our children and grandchildren.

Native plant landscapes have great curb appeal.

Native plants help build natural habitats designed to accommodate the local fauna. They are naturally programmed to produce their flowers, seeds, nectar, nuts and fruit at the times needed to nourish year-round birds and insects, as well as those migrating through in the spring and fall. If you plant it, they will come. And those birds and butterflies and bees and other desirable and interesting wildlife will grace your yard, transforming it into a beautiful and vibrant place of wonder, year after year.

For more info and ideas about using native plants in your landscape, check out the following websites.

Native Plant Society of Texas — npsot.org

Ladybird Wildflower Center — wildflower.org

National Wildlife Federation — nwf.org/Garden-for-Wildlife/About/Native-Plants

And speaking of native plants, Oct. 18-24 is Texas Native Plant Week! Our September rains have encouraged maximilian sunflowers, ceniza and salvias to bloom a rainbow of colors. Visit your plant supplier and ask about their native plants. Fall's cooler weather provides the perfect time to plant.

Jan Carrington is a Texas Master Naturalist, Big Country Chapter. Master Naturalists are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. For information, go to txmn.tamu.edu or the BCTXMN Facebook page.