

WHY SHOULD WE PLANT NATIVE PLANTS?

Native plants are a vital part of our ecosystem. They provide food and shelter for native insects, birds and wildlife all year round. They are a critical link in the chain for bees and other pollinators that insure our food supply. They are adapted to our soils and climate and are therefore easier to establish and grow, requiring much less water and fertilizer. They are a source of carefree beauty for the landscape.

“Only 3-5% of undisturbed habitat is left in the USA. It is inadequate to support our native species. 95% of the native plants and animals could become extinct within our lifetimes. Alien species do not sustain our native wildlife- from those we see to those we don’t- including pollinators and vital links in our food chain.”

Douglas Tallamy, Bringing Nature Home

There are many ways to define native plants. Purists consider a native plant to be one that was originally found here before America was settled. Some only consider a plant native if it is naturally found in the state or bioregion that you are from. Others call any plant native to North America or the United States native. Depending on your opinion, native plants can embrace not just the straight species but can be loosely defined to include all cultivars, varieties, and hybrids.

At Natureworks we not only carry the straight species of native plants, but also many of the newest cultivars. We plant them in our demonstration gardens and in our home gardens as well as the gardens of our clients. We are continuously testing and trialing native plants. We proudly carry the American Beauties line of native plants.

For many years, plants sold in garden centers and used in landscapes have focused on *ornamental* characteristics: pretty flowers, specimen plant, hedge plant, foundation plant, etc. Now, the question that we ask about the plants we sell is “What is its **ecological function**?” In other words, what does this plant DO for native insects, pollinators, wildlife, birds, carbon sequestration... and all of the other parts of our world that are important?

The person who introduced this conversation is Dr. Douglas Tallamy, a professor in the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware. His 2009 book [Bringing Nature Home](#) taught us that native insects co-evolved with native plants. His research has proved that native plants support the insects that are vital links in the food chain. These insects are fast disappearing and the future of our ecosystem depends on their survival. We MUST plant native plants to stop their decline and build up their populations to healthy levels.

Doug Tallamy partnered with Rick Darke to write another very important book, [The Living Landscape](#), in 2014. This book contains extensive charts in the back that demonstrate both the landscape *and* the ecological functions of our native plants. This has become a working manual for landscape designers, garden centers, nursery owners, and homeowners.

Insect populations are drastically declining not only in the United States but all over the world. There are many reasons for this including lack of food sources, use of toxic pesticides, the spread of invasive plants,

night light pollution, habitat fragmentation, and large expanses of monoculture lawns. We NEED insects to sustain viable ecosystems. Insects pollinate flowering plants. Flowering plants support food webs all the way up the food chain. Insects also decompose organic matter and recycle nutrients.

Why are NATIVE PLANTS so important? Native plants have been proven to support native insects. Doug Tallamy uses two trees as classic examples. A native oak tree in CT can support 462 caterpillar species. A non-native ginkgo tree supports 0 caterpillar species. Do we have to plant ONLY native plants and never plant non-natives? Relax, plant geeks and horticulturists everywhere. His answer is no. His suggestion is to strive for 70% native plants in your home landscape.

Doug Tallamy and the University of Delaware have collaborated with the National Wildlife Federation to create **The Native Plant Finder**. This helps to connect the dots between the native plants and the insects that feed upon them. They focus on *keystone plants*, the top plants in each category that provide the most food for the largest number of caterpillars, the larval stage of moths and butterflies. These caterpillars are the primary food of all birds when they are rearing their young. According to Dr. Tallamy, “birds eat 500 million tons of insects globally each year...432 species of North American birds are currently threatened with extinction.”

Thus, plants are more than just a pretty face on the landscape. They are a vital link in the food chain, intricately connected in the web of life.

What can YOU do? Take your responsibility as the steward of the land you live on seriously. **Every yard matters**. Pledge to increase the number of native plants that you plant every year and remove invasive plants. Don't ever buy invasive plants. Learn about and plant pollinator gardens to further increase the health of insect populations. Work with your local towns, land trusts, schools, municipal buildings, and everyone you communicate with to teach about the vital importance of these actions. Reduce your lawn- it is a wasteland for pollinators and native insects. Allow flowering broadleaf plants to be a part of any lawn that remains. Leave as many fallen leaves as you can every autumn. Many insects overwinter in the leaf litter. Put your outside lights on motion detector sensors to help protect the moths. Stop using toxic poisons. Don't blanket spray for mosquitoes or ticks- seek out alternatives. Support biodiversity in every way that you can.

We need to adopt a totally different mindsets about insects eating our plants:

“Plants are supposed to pass the energy that they capture from the sun up the food chain. Insects transfer energy from plants to other animals that cannot eat plants directly.

A plant that has fed nothing has not done its job.”

-Doug Tallamy

RESOURCES

Books:

[Bringing Nature Home](#), Douglas W. Tallamy, 2009, Timber Press

[The Living Landscape](#), Douglas Tallamy and Rick Darke, 2014, Timber Press

[The Natural Habitat Garden](#), Ken Druse, 1994, Clarkson Potter

[Noah's Garden](#), Sarah Stein, 1993, Houghton Mifflin Co.

Websites:

<https://www.bringingnaturehome.net/>

Native Plant Finder www.nwf.org National Wildlife Federation

Put in your zip code and find native plants for your location and all of the insects that feed upon them. Created in collaboration with Douglas Tallamy and the University of Delaware based on his research

<https://abnativeplants.com/index.cfm>

Refine your search by plants found in CT and be sure to take advantage of their garden plan feature

<https://www.chesapeakelandscape.org/hometown-habitat/>

<https://www.audubon.org/> National Audubon Society

<https://cipwg.uconn.edu> Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group

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