

Native in the Northeast

North American gardeners are blessed with an amazing diversity of native perennials. Many can be found right in our own home towns. However, this diversity is not fully appreciated. A few natives are among our more popular perennials including *Phlox subulata*, *Phlox paniculata* and *Tiarella cordifolia*. Yet, there are so many more native species to be “discovered” by gardeners and plant professionals alike.

There has been a historic bias in the horticultural industry against the use of natives. Probably the most compelling reason for this is that natives were equated with weeds. If it grew in the woods, the wetlands, the fields, it surely was not “worthy” of garden use. Plants needed to be distinct from the natural world and refined by man before they were accepted by the gardening public.

People’s views about the natural world are changing. We are beginning to open our eyes and realize there are multitudes of attractive native plants out there fit for garden use. They offer advantages beyond beauty, too. Selected appropriately, native plants have low maintenance requirements because they are well adapted to our area.

Joanne and I have incorporated some natives into our own garden, many of which have become highlights of the garden. *Schizachyrium scoparium* (Little Bluestem) is so pleasing to look at just about all year long. I used to say that *Asclepias tuberosa* (Butterfly weed) was my favorite orange flowered perennial. Now, I include it among my favorite perennials, period. *Heliopsis helianthoides* with a heavy show of yellow daisies mid to late summer came from my grandma’s garden, so it is very sentimental to me. Towering above all else is the trellis covered wall of *Aristolochia durior* (Dutchman’s pipe) that screens our front porch so well. Planted in July, it still grew to the top of the trellis (10 feet!) by the end of the first year. With very large heart-shaped leaves this plant is an effective screen. *Panicum amarum* ‘Dewey Blue’ is a winner – graceful, clump-forming blue foliage turning buff for winter with attractive seed heads August through winter. Then there’s the *Opuntia humifusa* (Prickly pear cactus). Cacti always evoke curiosity – especially in kids. Our one native cactus is no exception. Just watch the spines!

Understanding the environmental site conditions that dictate which plants will grow where and the ability to choose plants accordingly is the key to successful gardening. Natives offer us an opportunity to choose plants adapted to the climate and soils of our region. With so many natives now available successful gardening has never been easier!