



TERRY WRITERS

Wild for Natives

These perennial favorites give maximum payoff for minimal effort

By Pat Terry



wild for natives
These perennial favorites give maximum payoff for minimal effort
BY PAT TERRY | PHOTOS BY LARRY HOFFMAN



The four-acre garden is a beautiful blend of native and non-native plants. The owners, who live in the area, have a passion for native plants. They have a large collection of native plants and are always looking for new ones to add to the garden. They have a lot of experience with native plants and are happy to share their knowledge with others. They have a lot of native plants and are always looking for new ones to add to the garden. They have a lot of experience with native plants and are happy to share their knowledge with others.



PERENNIAL PICK: The *Androsace tereticaulis* is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed.



It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed.

Wild could be broken down into a number of categories: native plants, non-native plants, and plants that are native to the area. Native plants are those that have been in the area for a long time. Non-native plants are those that have been introduced to the area. Plants that are native to the area are those that have been in the area for a long time. Native plants are those that have been in the area for a long time. Non-native plants are those that have been introduced to the area. Plants that are native to the area are those that have been in the area for a long time.



PERENNIAL PICK: The *Androsace tereticaulis* is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed. It is a hardy perennial that grows in a variety of conditions. It is a great choice for a garden bed.



Native Garden Resources

- 1. [The Native Garden](#) is a website that offers information on native plants and gardens. It is a great resource for anyone interested in native plants and gardens.
- 2. [The Native Garden](#) is a website that offers information on native plants and gardens. It is a great resource for anyone interested in native plants and gardens.
- 3. [The Native Garden](#) is a website that offers information on native plants and gardens. It is a great resource for anyone interested in native plants and gardens.

Wild for Natives

These perennial favorites
give maximum payoff
for minimal effort

By Pat Terry

What could be better than a garden that looks great, requires little coddling, and attracts wildlife? A trend toward gardens filled with native plants—species endemic to the region before the arrival of European settlers—has gained quiet momentum among Chicago gardeners. Last summer's drought only served to accelerate interest in native perennials, which were more likely to adapt than to give up the ghost.

With encouragement from the Chicago Botanic Garden, Morton Arboretum, Brookfield Zoo, and the Notebaert Nature Museum—not to mention green mayor Richard M. Daley—Chicago parks, street median planters, and other public spaces are getting on board as well. Part of the attraction of native plants for gardeners and environmentalists alike: They require little watering and no pesticides or fertilizer.

Even under extreme drought, established natives will survive. "If native plants have been planted within the last two years, they will need supplemental irrigation during droughts like we had last summer," explains Boyce Tankersley, manager of living plant documentation at the Chicago Botanic Garden. "If the plants have been established for three years or more, they have been adapted to handle these droughts."

Beyond aesthetics and convenience, native plants aid in conservation. "People feel that by using native vegetation, they are helping to either preserve species or keep them growing in an area where they're being lost," says Jim Steffen, an ecologist with the Chicago Botanic Garden. "Native plants are also beneficial for things besides the garden, such as butterflies and hummingbirds."

Some enthusiastic gardeners draw on native plants to restore woodlands that have been damaged by invasive species. Art Gara, co-owner of Art and Linda's Wildflowers in Cicero, has been overseeing the restoration of a swamp, white-oak forest on a 3-acre property in Riverwoods since 2001. The woods surrounding Hans and Diane Aschman's window-filled house had been badly degraded by invasive buckthorn, which creates deep shade, explains Gara. "The only plants left were Jack-in-the-pulpit, geraniums, chokeberries, and gooseberries."

Gara's resurrected garden uses blue lobelia, cardinal flowers, and other shade-lovers as colorful notes amidst the owner's rock gardens and sculptures. "Even with the terrible drought last summer and a watering ban, the cardinal flowers and blue lobelia were blooming," notes the passionate environmentalist.

Marian and John Thill's colorful garden on a suburban lot in Morton Grove is three-quarters native species. The garden is specifically designed to attract wildlife, and attract it does. The Thills have documented visits from 75 species of birds and 19 species of butterflies. "If you invite them, they will come," says Marian. "It's not the size of the lot, but what you do with it—and what we've done is create a little semblance of habitat."

The four-season garden draws winged visitors year round. The serviceberry ripens early, followed by one of Marian's favorites, mountain ash. "Chicago is the southern-most tip of its region, but if you can get it to grow, it's great," she says. Mountain-ash berries attract five species of birds, while hummingbirds seek out crabapples on their migration north. In fall, numerous species enjoy the fruit. A native holly offers berries into the winter, and what isn't eaten during the cold months greets the robins when they return in the spring.

The Thills were already avid gardeners when they decided to convert to a habitat that would attract butterflies and birds. To educate themselves about native species, they read everything they could lay their hands on, and Marian earned a naturalist certificate at the Morton Arboretum.

They had the right idea. Don't just convert your garden to native plants without some thought, advises Greg Stack, horticulturist with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Even if you're using native species, you still need to put plants in a site that will support their growth, he points out.

"The natives may or may not be as ornamental as people want or *think* they should be," says Stack. "Natives might sometimes look 'weedy,' but that's just the way they are. I've seen many people put native plants and prairie areas in their

Starting a Native Garden?

Chose native species that fit your soil, sun, and moisture conditions. Most Chicago-area soil contains clay and has fairly high pH levels (more alkaline). For a quick test of its consistency, squeeze some damp soil tight. If it holds its shape, it leans toward clay. If it crumbles, it's probably more loamy or sandy soil. A soil test will tell you whether it truly is alkaline or if it's acidic.

ON THE SUNNY SIDE

Think of native plants in terms of community. For a sunny yard, combine prairie species—grasses and flowering plants—that will complement each other in appearance and compete for space, which helps keep them under control. For shorter grasses, try prairie dropseed or little bluestem. Taller grasses include big bluestem and switch grass. Among flowering plants, choose from black-eyed Susans, blazing stars, coneflowers and spiderwort. *Silphium*s such as prairie dock or compass plant provide height.

IN THE SHADE

For a shady environment, choose an oak woodland or a savanna species. Woodland grasses include bottlebrush, woodland brome, and silky wild rye. For flowering plants, consider starry campion, yellow pimpernel, wild columbine, Jacob's ladder, and woodland phlox. Add purple giant hyssop for height.

—PT.



Courtesy of Chicago Botanic Garden



Courtesy of Chicago Botanic Garden

yards, and all of a sudden they've got a mess because they don't know how to handle it—or the neighbors don't understand.”

Like any garden, planting with natives requires some experimentation. Most native plants thrive in situations where nutrients aren't readily available, points out Steffen of the Chicago Botanic Garden. They don't need additional fertilizers. “So if you plant them in a yard, fertilize them, and give them a lot of nutrients, they tend to look different—much coarser—than those in the wild,” he says. “And they tend to flop over.”

If you're thinking native, peruse the catalogs published by native plant producers to learn the appropriate species for different sites, suggests Steffen. Buy plants from a local source, he says, because they're probably better suited to your growing conditions.

Horticulturist Stack suggests visiting native gardening specialists, such as The Natural Garden in St. Charles, to ask questions and view their plants. “They are big suppliers both for the home gardener and commercial landscaper, and their display gardens will give you an idea what the plants look like when they are lush and in community.” **MH**

PATRICIA TERRY IS A CHICAGO WRITER.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON RESOURCES FEATURED IN THIS STORY, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 96.

Native Garden Resources

- Art and Linda's Wildflowers, Cicero, has images of sample gardens, links to native plant and seed sources, and other information. Visit www.artandlindaswildflowers.com.
- University of Illinois Extension's Web site offers gardeners an interactive link for questions and answers. Visit www.urbanext.uiuc.edu, click on the “Hort Corner,” and then choose “Ask Extension” on the right-hand menu bar.
- The Natural Garden, St. Charles, provides an extensive list of native perennials, grasses and sedges, trees, shrubs, and vines with information on blooming season, sun and soil requirements, size, height, and color. Visit www.thenaturalgardeninc.com.
- Morton Arboretum, Lisle, offers information on native trees. Visit www.mortonarb.org.
- Chicago Botanic Garden Plant Information services offers consultation from professional staff and master gardener volunteers, as well as an array of publications. Call 847-835-0972 or visit www.chicagobotanic.org.