

Native Plants for the Novice

By Susan Camp

This week's "Gardening Corner" won't appeal to everyone. It is aimed at two specific groups: Gardeners who aren't sure they want to grow natives, but who want to give it a try for the health of bees, butterflies, and other critters; and gardeners who think most native plants look like weeds.

I get it. When Jim and I first moved to Gloucester County, our garden was filled with all the traditional plants: daffodils, forsythia, peonies, and azaleas in spring; daylilies and gladioli in summer. We planted roses and hydrangeas and weren't even aware that the native perennials we saw growing by the roadside were a garden option.

About ten or twelve years ago, I started reading about "wildflowers," North American native plants that many people considered weeds, and were happy to eradicate, or at least prevent them from taking hold in their flowerbeds and lawns. With increasing concern in recent years about loss of wildlife habitat and food sources for valuable pollinators, gardeners in every state are planting more natives and demonstrating that wildflowers are not just weeds to be mown down.

If you are looking for some new perennials or shrubs to liven up your garden and encourage pollinators, visit the Virginia Native Plant Society website at <https://vnps.org> for natives appropriate for Coastal Virginia. Native plant nurseries aren't always easy to find. Search for them online, and encourage local garden centers to sell native plant species. Once you try native perennials and shrubs, you will discover how little work they require.

Many native plants tolerate drought. They can be grown in any type of soil, even clay, and require minimal maintenance. They attract bees and butterflies and provide food and habitat sources for birds, insects, and small mammals. Most are deer-resistant, which is a real bonus to those of us who suffer loss of azaleas and daylilies to hungry deer every year.

One of my favorite natives is obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*). This herbaceous perennial sends up spikes of tubular pink or pale lavender tubular flowers from late summer through fall. The delicate blossoms attract hummingbirds, as well as butterflies and bees that frequently drowse face down on the blossoms. The square stems identify obedient plant as a member of the mint family. Obedient plant grows best in moist, well-drained soil in full sun. It will grow in light shade, but the stems may flop over. If the flowers, are bent, they tend to stay in that position, hence its common name. Obedient plant spreads by seed and by tough, shallow rhizomes. Spreading can be aggressive, but the individual plants are easy to pull up.

Another native perennial that I have grown for years is white yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*). Long stems emerge from each clump to produce flat clusters composed of tiny, creamy-white flowers. The fern-like foliage has an aromatic smell, and the entire plant dries well for use in many herbal preparations. Yarrow grows best in full sun in average soil with dry to medium moisture and good drainage. Yarrow blooms all summer. Deadhead spent flowers to encourage

new blooms. Yarrow tolerates summer heat and humidity Butterflies flock to yarrow. The plant is toxic to cats, dogs, and horses. Yarrow is another aggressive grower, so it must be kept in check.

A native perennial that I have not grown is rough or wrinkleleaf goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*), although I have tried other goldenrod species with good success. Rough goldenrod is a clump-forming perennial that reaches up to 3 to 5 feet tall, so it works best at the back of a border. The leaves are rough and hairy with a wrinkled appearance. The bright golden flowers grow in graceful, arching sprays, and attract more than 100 species of bees, wasps, butterflies, and skippers. Rough goldenrod grows in full sun to light shade in average, acidic, well-drained, medium to wet soil. This plant spreads by self-seeding and rhizomes and can be propagated by dividing the basal rosettes in late winter.

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