



# GOING NATIVE

Help your customers draw wildlife into their backyards and provide their communities with a host of other benefits by offering regionally native plants.

**By Maureen Gilmer**

**T**en years ago, only die-hard botany freaks and wildlife aficionados were into native plants. Today, you'll find botanical garden and native plant society plant sales are mob scenes, as everyone tries to get first pick of uncommon perennials, shrubs, vines and bulbs. The reason? America is waking up to the fact that native plants are beautiful and carefree.

People feel good about natives because they don't demand excessive water, fertilizer, pesticides and other chemicals. They also lure butterflies and hummingbirds, nature's living jewels of the garden. And birds come to feed not only on berries and seed, but unwanted insects. Garden centers that put natives front and center will capitalize on this environmentally friendly trend.

## EDUCATING YOUR CUSTOMERS

The challenge to retailers is two-pronged. First, you must stock natives that look good and hold up well under standard retail nursery care. Some dryland species are notoriously vulnerable to over-watering, which is why they've been scarce in the past. Second, your staff must be able to tell customers about the virtues of these less-common plants, including their habit, exposure, origin and cultural needs.

One of the stumbling blocks is in the term "native." It simply defines where a plant originates in the wild, which can be as specific as a Sierra Nevada endemic penstemon or an aster found throughout the Eastern United States. The term is therefore relative.

Consider four layers of native-ness for a single species. Liquidambar trees are native to North America (continent), the United States (national), the South (region) and Louisiana (state). Strive to stock plants native on the regional level, in this case, the South. This provides a broader selection so you can create displays that include a diversity of plant types.

Develop a collection of fact sheets on the natives you intend to stock to

better help customers. Sources of such material include farm advisors, fish and game departments, forest services, university extension, native plant societies, the Audubon Society and the USDA Soil Conservation Service. In water-taxed communities, there is extensive material available — from water agencies, municipalities and other resource conservation arms of government — to encourage the use of natives.

Some eco-friendly planned communities have strict regulations on the kinds of plants allowed by covenants, codes and restrictions. These customers may have little background but must comply by law with the preference for natives over exotics in their landscaping. Your staff should be familiar with certain housing developments to more quickly help these residents (customers) find what they need.

There's a widely held misconception that natives are dull, scruffy plants, particularly in the West. It's important to dispel this myth right away by putting the showiest natives in high-profile spots. Less-dramatic natives might be grouped with them to create a more diverse composition. For example, Monrovia Nursery Co. has produced the outstanding Forest Pansy redbud, (*Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' P.P. #2556). This purple-leaved redbud is a great attention-getter when in bloom and continues its visual impact over the entire growing season due to its outstanding foliage.

## REGIONAL FAVORITES

Exploit the natives that have always been a part of traditional nursery stock. Consider these your anchor palette. They are tried-and-true with little risk of limited shelf life. These familiar fellows may simply be repackaged as "regionally native" plants to shore up a collection of new-to-your-store species.

Midwestern perennials such as purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) make outstanding specimens in bloom. They also lure butterflies and late-season birds, which feed on the seed-filled cones. Tall, wild bergamot, (*Monarda fistulosa*) is sometimes called bee balm because it is the quintes-

Pictured above, left to right: Outstanding California fuchsia is irresistible to hummingbirds, as are most other red-flowered native species; Seas of blue Ceanothus lure bees, butterflies and other beneficial forms of wildlife to Western gardens; Dogwoods are not only beautiful in bloom but produce brightly colored fruit relished by birds late in the season. (Photos courtesy of Maureen Gilmer)



sential habitat plant for these insects. At any time you'll find many different bee species in the same flower.

The multi-season beauty of American cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*) is vital to songbirds in the late summer and fall when berries mature. This plant and shrubby cinquefoil (*Potentilla fruticosa*), are essential natives for Northern regional palettes. Vines for Southern regions include two hummingbird magnets: scarlet trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and trumpet honeysuckle, (*Lonicera sempervirens*). In the West, greedy Rufus hummingbirds actually guard blooming California fuchsia (*Zauschneria californica*), fighting off competition for its tangerine-red, tubular flowers.

Keep in mind that native plants aren't isolated species, but combine to create a multidimensional landscape or plant community. Stock the full range of native plant types: annual wildflowers, perennials, ornamental grasses, ferns, vines, shrubs and trees. Group them according to exposure so the customer knows what grows with what by how you've presented them.

Shade garden collections for the Northwest might include western bleeding heart (*Dicentra formosa*) and maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*). When grouped with bird-friendly berry plants such as Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) and dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*), even shaded sites become active habitats.

In this palette, there is also an educate-the-customer opportunity to explain the understory plant community that thrives in the wild beneath canopies of natural forests. Homeowners often contend with similar conditions under street trees with high canopies. Problems of limited light and acidic soils may be solved the natural way by applying the plants from nature's own model.

This same concept of problem-solving and opportunity applies all over America. Don't fight windy Midwestern sites; use well-adapted prairie grasses and the many nectar source perennials such as asters, butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and Kansas gayfeather (*Liatris pycnostachya*). Cope with high water table and saturated soils down South with river-bottom species. Those adapted to such conditions include red cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), a favorite of hummingbirds; and berry-rich Southern black haw, (*Viburnum rufidulum*). In the arid Southwest, explore drought and heat-adapted species to replace consumptive lawns and needy traditional garden plants. Yuccas adorn night gardens with huge candelabra stalks of white blossoms. These lure a specific moth pollinator by light and scent for one of the most famous plant-to-insect relationships in the world. Christmasberry (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) makes an excellent hedge evergreen with its huge sprays of bright red holiday berries relished by migrating robins.

## MAKING IT WORK

Recent marketing studies have shown that customers prefer plants accompanied by a detailed information tag. This is particularly true with natives because even seasoned gardeners may have little knowledge of them. Backgrounders help customers at every level learn about the plant's preferences, wildlife relationships and how these relate to where it prefers to live in the wild. It also ensures that the plants thrive and are not returned due to poor performance or an untimely death.

North America is a treasure trove of fabulous plants that make stellar garden candidates. New notions of patriotism fuel interest in all things American, including cultivating our own botanical bounty. But beyond the beauty of the wildlife they lure, the greatest benefits remain survival on local rainfall, resistance to pests and disease, and the ability to naturalize for a truly carefree garden. 🌱

*Maureen Gilmer is an author and TV personality in Palm Springs, Calif. She appears regularly on Do It Yourself Network's (DIY) "Weekend Gardening," a program featuring weekend projects for the intermediate gardener that make gardens thrive. She can be reached at mo@moplants.com.*

## Butterfly house

This butterfly house has hinged doors that allow you to position sticks, bark or other natural materials used for clinging. It offers a safe haven for butterflies to hibernate or seek shelter in bad weather. Made of cypress with a copper top, these houses come in a number of stains and stand 23 inches tall. Lazy Hill Farm Design. (800) 396-3566. **Write in 1400**



## Birdhouses

This half-round birdhouse is made from Eastern white pine with a cypress-shingled roof and copper trim. It comes in a light gray or dark green color and has a rope hanger and flat back. The house is easy to clean and has plenty of ventilation and drainage. The birdhouse is 12 x 7 x 12 inches, has a 1½-inch hole and is made in the United States. Heartwood. (888) 490-9046. **Write in 1401**

## Shepherd hook

Border Concept's shepherd hooks make great hangers for bird feeders and houses. Available in heights ranging from 5-7 feet, these hooks feature a no-weld, one-piece design; a deep 12-inch kick-back support; and durable exterior powder coat. No assembly required. Border Concept. (800) 845-3343. **Write in 1435**

## Glass birdhouses

These glass art birdhouses are made with fused or fire-polished glass. They come in a number of colors, sizes and designs. The houses are designed for the indoor and outdoor gardener and each is handcrafted personally by artist Meryl Strichartz. Glass Art by Strichartz. (888) 687-8028. **Write in 1402**



## Bee nesting box

These bee nesting boxes will allow gardening enthusiasts to enjoy improved fruit yields by attracting bees to their backyards. Bees make a series of nests in tubes housed snugly in a weatherproof outer canister. Each tube contains a row of cells, each separated from its neighbor by a wall of mud applied by the mother bee, who also uses mud to seal a completed nest. Nest kits consist of a series of tubes housed in a weatherproof outer container of environmentally friendly plastic. The tubes comprise an outer lining of recycled cardboard and an inner, smooth paper lining. Oxford Bee Company. (800) 733-4146. **Write in 1403** ▶

