Reconnect with nature in your own yard by landscaping with native plants.

Grow Wild

Story By James L. Ellis
Photos By Michael Jeffords

The unique red and yellow flowers of wild columbine make a nice spring show and draw another bejeweled splendor, the ruby-throated hummingbird.

Walking through a remnant of native tallgrass prairie, I marvel at the beauty and diversity of plant life in such a small space. White, purple and yellow blooms from asters and goldenrods; deep greens, orange-reds and tawny browns on ripening stalks of big and little bluestem; the playful fountain of thin leaves spraying from prairie dropseed; and the flowing texture of the many tightly packed plant stems.

I love to visit these rare places on the Illinois landscape, but I miss them when I leave. I try to remember the grasses and flowers in my mind's eye, and photographs offer fleeting visual reminders of my visit. What if I could experience some of the beauty of the prairie at my own home? What if I could grow some of these plants in my own garden?

Gardening is an enjoyable hobby for many people, and use of native plants in the home landscape is slowly becoming more popular as people learn about the beauty and benefits of native plants.

Why garden with native plants?

Besides the sheer beauty of many of our native prairie and woodland wildflowers, there are practical reasons to garden with native plants.

Much of our Illinois landscape is dominated by agricultural, urban and suburban uses. Native prairies, woodlands and other wild places continually shrink. As conservationists, we should

maintain and enhance local biodiversity by using plants native to our locale in our home landscapes.

Plants native to an area have evolved for hundreds or thousands of years and are genetically suited to that locale. Deep-rooted native prairie plants can withstand drought and insect pests. Native plants in the home landscape are low maintenance once established—no or little mowing, irrigating, fertilizing or spraying pesticides is required to keep them happy and healthy. Trimming of shrubs or pulling unwanted weeds may be all that's necessary—at the whim of the gardener.

Native plants offer a unique beauty, sense of place and chance to connect to the natural landscape and its history. Your choice of plants can reflect the richness of tallgrass prairie or lush beauty of woodlands in spring. Native wildflowers in your garden reveal the seasonal rhythms, colors and textures of your locale.

Prairie dropseed grass, shown here in a natural prairie, makes a handsome show with its tufted spray of thin leaves.

Ecologically designed gardens

Illinois is "The Prairie State." As much as 60 percent of the state was once covered with vast, flowing tallgrass prairie. Much of the rest of the land was forested or covered with various types of wetlands. Practically speaking then, choosing plants native to the prairie or forest in Illinois makes sense in the home landscape. Remember that tallgrass prairie is not all grass—the prairie flora also includes hundreds of species of wildflowers.

There is a growing movement of native plant gardeners across the nation, but when you visit your local garden center, you may still find a paucity of information about native plants and even less actual native plant material. When you decide to incorporate native plants into your home landscape, you also need to arm yourself with good information.

As a first step, get your hands on books about gardening and landscaping with native plants. Conduct a Web search on gardening or landscaping

Yellow coneflower and black-eyed Susan provide some midsummer color while the large foliage of false wild indigo, prairie dock and wild quinine make an attractive garden bed in this home landscape.

Mayapple is a distinctive spring wildflower that will slowly spread over time to fill out a woodland wildflower garden.

with native plants for useful and free information to suit your garden. Search out and join local conservation groups. Members of these groups often are using native plants in their home landscape and are more than happy to share their gardening experiences.

Take the time to learn plants native to your area. Find and visit your local natural areas—places where the local flora is in its natural glory. Search out reference books about the local flora as well as people who know plants. Use your new-found plant knowledge—where they grow, what conditions suit them best, height, flower color and bloom period—to plan, order and plant your native garden.

Get to know your garden. If you have a sunny spot with well-drained soils, choose sun-loving, deep-rooted prairie perennials. If your garden is shady with moist soils, search out woodland plants and wildflowers. Let your knowledge of the local flora guide your planting plan and your reliance on the U.S. Department of Agriculture hardiness zones will lessen.

Buy as locally as possible when purchasing seed or plants as stock collected and grown locally is better suited genetically to the area. Your local garden center may not have everything or anything on your wish list of species, so an Internet search or advice from a knowledgeable native plant gardener becomes invaluable. Avoid buying 'native' seed from growers, say, in Kansas or Nebraska.

Never, for the sake of our natural areas, dig plants from the wild.

A properly prepared site is necessary for any successful garden. Remove unwanted vegetation before planting desired plants, but disturb the soil as little as possible to discourage the sprouting of annual weed seeds.

Seedlings offer the best and quickest way to establish a native garden, but seeds decrease the start-up cost. Handle and install native plant seedlings as you would any perennial, giving plants plenty of room to grow and watering as necessary until plants are established.

Mulch with composted leaves or other organic matter to discourage weed growth and retain moisture. Hand weed unwanted plants.

The purple petals and lush foliage on New England aster add color and texture to the native wildflower garden in the early fall.

There is no need to rip out all of your lawn or pluck all of your petunias. Gradually and steadily plant pale purple coneflower or stiff goldenrod or prairie dropseed as you increase the size of your own wild area.

The long-lived native perennials of our prairies and woodlands may take some time before they flower or fully fill their allotted spot. Have patience and be persistent, and you will be duly rewarded with the slow flutter of a monarch butterfly, the quick buzz of a ruby-throated hummingbird and the pride that comes from developing a wildflower garden that will grow for generations.

James L. Ellis is a Critical Trends Assessment program botanist with the Illinois Natural History Survey and works with Grand Prairie Friends as a Prairie Grove volunteer.

A tallgrass prairie isn't quite complete without tall grasses. The feathery heads of Indian grass add texture and height to the prairie garden.