



NATIVE PLANTS: ESSENTIAL TO A HEALTHY LANDSCAPE

By William Seaman

More than ever, native plants should be the preferred choice of homeowners, businesses and institutions for their gardens. A native plant is adapted to local climate and seasons, and offers advantages concerning drought hardiness and resistance to disease and insect pests. In contrast, so-called invasive plants cause problems in the environment because they may be toxic to native wildlife, while a lack of natural controls can allow rampant growth. This *Montreat Landcare Fact Sheet* offers some practical tips on use of native plants in the landscapes in and around Montreat, North Carolina and the Swannanoa Valley, and directs the gardener to a wealth of information.

What Is a Native Plant?

A **native plant** is simply that. They are “*natural elements of a regional landscape,*” according to The Botanical Gardens of Asheville (BGA), which states that, “*native plants are those that evolved in a region over geologic time and whose distribution across the landscape occurred mostly because of climate events and adaptation to site conditions related to land formations... defined as plants that were found in North America before European settlement.*”



Yellow poplar flowers and seeds are eaten by birds and other wildlife (NCSU photo).

Locally, common native plant species include a variety of oak, hickory and other hardwood trees, several coniferous trees such as white pine and hemlock, and numerous ferns, grasses, shrubs and wildflowers including blackeyed Susan, lobelias, wild ginger and Jack-in-the-pulpit. These species, numbering in the hundreds, are adapted to local soil and weather conditions. They have evolved to co-exist with other plants and animals, including diseases and things that eat them, over a very long time.

Why Use Native Plants?

Using native plants in your landscape offers the benefits of having more wildlife to observe and enjoy, lower maintenance and upkeep in terms of native plant requirements for water, fertilizer and other chemicals, and avoiding the problems associated with invasive species, according to the North Carolina State University (NCSU) “Going Native” program. And, “*Use of native plants in home landscaping joins together both our native heritage and a healthy land ethic,*” states BGA. Further, “*Native plants have many inherent qualities and adaptive traits that make them aesthetically pleasing, practical, and ecologically valuable for landscaping. They contribute to the health, and even the restoration, of an ecosystem by placing fewer demands on resources.*” Plants recommended for Montreat are listed in Landcare Fact Sheet # 2.

How Do Native Plants Help Wildlife?

Loss of natural habitats across the local and national landscape is a concern to many citizens. You can help provide wildlife such as birds and butterflies with an oasis of the habitat they need to thrive. According to NCSU, “*The native plants that you use can meet the needs, including food*

and cover, of native wildlife without causing long-term damage to local plant communities... the right diversity of native plants” provides:



Brown thrashers eat fruits in the late summer, fall, and winter (NCSU photo).

- Protective cover for many animals.
- Seeds, nuts, and fruits for various mammals.
- Seeds, fruits, and insects for birds.
- Nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies.
- Larval host plants for butterfly caterpillars.

It is noteworthy that the Town of Montreat was the first “Certified Wildlife Habitat” in North Carolina, due to the gardening efforts of many homeowners, as recognized by the National Wildlife Federation.

Why Avoid Non-Native Plants?

Exotics are **non-native** plants introduced by human action from another geographic area. Some are accidental, but many have been deliberate, intended to beautify gardens or actually enhance wildlife. Many are benign. But, a particular class of non-natives called **invasive species** is dangerous to native flora and even animals. They can choke out favored wildflowers, overgrow plants, and be harmful to wildlife. Montreat “invasives” include Japanese knotweed, Oriental bittersweet, and even English Ivy. “*The use of only native plants in your landscape helps limit the chances that potentially invasive, exotic plant species will be introduced into the environment around your home*” (NCSU). See Landcare Fact Sheet # 2 concerning “invasives,” with photos.

Where Can I See Native Plant Exhibits and Demonstrations?

The **Montreat Native Plant Garden** is located on the right-hand (eastern) side of Assembly Drive as you enter Montreat. It’s accessible from the Memorial Garden parking area via footbridge over Flat Creek. Parking is also at the Welcome Center. Other gardens include the nearby **North Carolina Arboretum** and **The Botanical Gardens at Asheville** (websites below).

Questions? Need More Information?

Reliable nearby sources of information on plants, classes, field trips, etc. locally include:

- ✓ **N. C. Arboretum**, <http://www.ncarboretum.org/>
- ✓ **N.C. Native Plant Society**, <http://www.ncwildflower.org/index.php>, including an Asheville Chapter, <http://ncwildflower.org/index.php/chapters/asheville/>
- ✓ **The Botanical Gardens at Asheville**, <http://www.ashevillebotanicalgardens.org/index.htm>
- ✓ **North Carolina State University’s Going Native: Urban Landscaping for Wildlife with Native Plants**, <http://www.ncsu.edu/goingnative/>
- ✓ **Montreat Certified Wildlife Habitat**, <http://www.montreatlandcare.org/projects/certified-wildlife-habitat>

What’s Montreat Landcare?

A Landcare group is a community-based group of volunteers working on conservation projects that contribute to positive environmental, social and economic outcomes. Montreat Landcare, the first in North Carolina, organizes projects to protect, to preserve, and to present the natural features of our cove. It is made up of representatives from organizations that are active in stewardship of the environment. See the Landcare website <http://montreatlandcare.org/>, or call 828-669-8002 for more information.



Fire pink is one of numerous native wildflowers (NCSU photo).