Naturescaping

The soil and climate of a region in large part dictate the plants and animals that naturally exist there. These species are referred to as native. Southern Ontario has its own collection of native species that have evolved together over thousands of years. However, despite their beauty, practicality and ecological significance, these plants remain a mystery to many, and are under-represented in gardens.

Naturescaping aspires to remedy this dilemma by re-establishing native plant communities in gardens. This practice models nearby natural areas in design and species selection, resulting in low-input, wildlife-supporting landscapes that reflect our natural heritage.

Southern Ontario has a great diversity of plant communities including deciduous and mixed forests, wetlands, savannahs and prairies. This fact sheet introduces wildflowers and grasses that are suitable for prairie and woodland gardens. Please see the Landscaping for Energy Conservation fact sheet in this series for information on trees and shrubs.

Planning your garden

To save time and money, plan before you dig. Make a sketch of your property and take note of soil, sunlight and moisture conditions. This will help you choose appropriate plants. Prairie plants work well in sunny, dry areas with infertile soil. Woodland plants thrive in shady areas with humus-rich soil. Visit natural areas and refer to the books and websites listed on the back of this fact sheet to learn about specific plants and their ecological connections. Native plants should not be seen as individual specimens but as members of communities.

Once the research and design are complete, share your plans with neighbours. Taking the time early on to explain your ideas and motivations will help maintain good community relations. It is also wise to check with your municipality about plant-related bylaws, and your service providers about underground utilities.

Transitioning your garden from a conventional ornamental garden to a more natural landscape will take time. This time will allow for some experimentation and evaluation, and will also be easier on neighbours. You may want to document progress with photos and journal writing, and share this learning experience with others.

Preparing beds

Prepare new garden beds by removing turfgrass. The easiest way to do this is to cover the grass using several layers of wet newspaper or biodegradable landscape fabric, which is then covered with soil and/or mulch. Ideally this is done in the fall before a spring planting. But it can also been done much closer to the planting date. The only soil amendment required for a prairie garden is sand, to increase drainage. Additional amendments are not recommended. Let the plants adapt to and change your garden soil slowly over time.

Maintaining your garden

Native plant gardens are not maintenance-free, but the work is different in some ways, and requires careful observation and on-going learning.

Newly planted wildflowers and grasses need about three centimeters of water a week for the first season. Water deeply once a week during dry periods. Gradually reduce watering frequency over the first growing season until it is no longer required.

Avoid using insecticides of any type on or around your native plants. These plants tolerate insect activity better than most ornamentals, and it is their role to support the insects that then support the birds, and so on. Plants may look ragged for a short time but will recover if protected from drought and additional injury.

Weeding is best done by hand after a rainfall when the roots are easily dug-up. Get an early start on this essential gardening task, and stick with it through the summer. Familiarize yourself with the different forms of your native plants from early spring through to late fall, so that you do not dig them out by mistake. When fall arrives the weeds will be mostly done for the year, and your attention can turn to other jobs like plant division and seed collection.

Prairie gardens

Prairies are dominated by wildflowers and grasses, and naturally occur on well-drained, nutrient-poor soils. A prairie garden is the perfect choice for a sunny area, and will provide food and habitat for a diversity of birds and butterflies. Below is a selection of suitable plants for a prairie garden.

PLANT SPECIES	HEIGHT	DESCRIPTION
Big Bluestem *(Andropogon gerardii)*	90-240 cm (3-8')	elegant prairie grass with bluish seed heads
Black-eyed Susan *(Rudbeckia hirta)*	30-90 cm (1-3')	yellow flowers through summer and fall
Butterfly milkweed *(Asclepias tuberosa)*	60-90 cm (2-3')	clusters of bright orange flowers in mid-summer
Foxglove Beardtongue *(Penstemon digitalis)*	60-120 cm (2-4')	white trumpet-shaped blooms in spring and early summer
Golden Alexanders *(Zizia aurea)*	30-90 cm (1-3')	yellow flowers in spring
Indian Grass *(Sorghastrum nutans)*	90-240 cm (3-8')	flowing grass with delicate bronze seed head
New England Aster *(Symphyotrichum novae-angliae)*	90-180 cm (3-6')	many small purple flowers in late-summer and fall
Prairie Smoke *(Geum triflorum)*	15-45 cm (6-18")	spring flowering plant with unique 'smoky' seed head
Wild Bergamot *(Monarda fistulosa)*	60-120 cm (2-4')	pale purple jester-hat-shaped flowers in late-spring and summer

Woodland garden

Woodland plants thrive in low-light conditions and are a perfect choice for shady yards. Many woodland plants can be used as groundcovers, and their early blooms provide a welcome sign of spring. Below is a selection of suitable plants for a woodland garden.

PLANT SPECIES	HEIGHT	DESCRIPTION
Bloodroot *(Sanguinaria canadensis)*	25 cm (10″)	white flowers in spring; lobed leaves
Bottlebrush Grass *(Elymus hystrix)*	90-150 cm (3-5′)	bristly seed head resembles a bottle brush
False Solomon's Seal *(Smilacina racemosa)*	45-90 cm (1.5-3′)	cluster of creamy white flowers at end of arching stem in spring
Foam Flower *(Tiarella cordifolia)*	15-30 cm (6-12″)	groundcover with spikes of white flowers in spring
Large-leaved Aster *(Aster macrophyllus)*	30-120 cm (1-4′)	many lavender blooms throughout summer; large, heart-shaped basal leaves
Wild Columbine *(Aquilegia canadensis)*	30-90 cm (1-3′)	showy red and yellow tubular flowers in late-spring and summer
Wild Geranium *(Geranium maculatum)*	30-60 cm (1-2′)	pink or magenta blooms in late-spring and early-summer
Wild Ginger *(Asarum canadense)*	15-20 cm (6-8″)	groundcover with single maroon flower under large heart-shaped basal leaves
Woodland Strawberry *(Fragaria vesca)*	7-15 cm (3-6″)	small white flowers followed by edible red berries
Zig Zag Goldenrod *(Solidago flexicaulis)*	45-90 cm (1.5-3′)	clusters of tiny, yellow flowers along zigzagging stem from August - October

Natural woodlands have rich soil. You can replicate this to a degree by adding compost before planting. Once established, woodland gardens require minimal maintenance. Let leaves remain where they fall to cycle nutrients naturally. Mulching the garden with wood chips, leaves or compost will suppress weeds, enrich the soil and keep it moist. Check with your municipality to see if they offer free compost and mulch.

Consider redirecting eavestroughs into the garden or installing a rainbarrel for watering when needed. This will save on watering costs and reduce stormwater runoff.

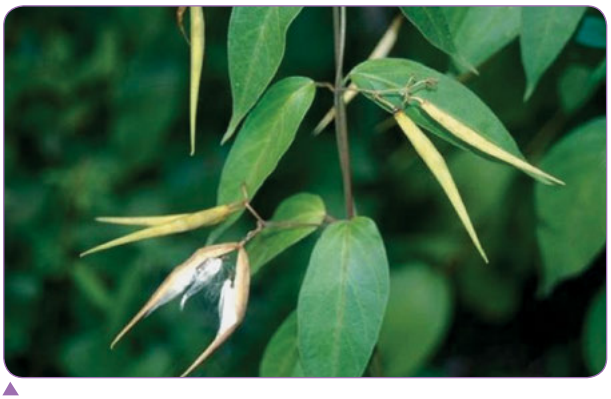
Fallen logs or snags (standing dead trees) provide habitat for birds, insects and other wildlife, and eventually also enrich the soil. If leaving a snag in your yard, ensure that it is not located where it may fall and cause harm.

Wild geranium

Garden invaders

Introduced species are considered invasive if they aggressively out-compete native species. Seeds from invasive plants can be transferred to gardens by wind, wildlife, pets and people. Remove these invaders as soon as you spot them, taking care to eliminate the entire plant with all the roots before it sets seed. You may need to do this for several years before the seed bank in the soil is gone. Watch out for these two common invaders:

Garlic mustard has serrated leaves, small white flowers and a slight garlic smell.



Dog-strangling vine has shiny dark green leaves, long seed pods and small brownish flowers.

Many common groundcovers, such as periwinkle, lily of the valley and goutweed, also have invasive tendencies. They spread rapidly throughout gardens and into nearby natural areas. Limit their spread by bordering gardens and pulling out 'escapees.' Even better, use native plants instead!

And finally, avoid "meadow in a can" seed mixes which often contain self-seeding non-natives, such as Queen Anne's lace and dame's rocket. These non-native species will quickly take-over.

Sources of native plants

Some conventional nurseries sell native plants along with the more typical ornamentals, but for greater selection and expertise, visit a specialized native plant nursery, such as the ones listed below. These nurseries collect and grow local seed to ensure genetic diversity, which is crucial to the long-term survival of native plant communities.

- Grow Wild! *www.grow-wild.com*
- Native Plants in Claremont *www.nativeplants.ca*
- Native Plant Nurseries *www.nativeplantnurseries.ca*

Additional resources

- Bringing Nature Home by Douglas Tallamy, 2007
- Canadian Wildlife Federation, Wild Spaces *www.wildaboutgardening.org*
- Evergreen *www.evergreen.ca*
- North American Native Plant Society *www.nanps.org*
- The New Ontario Naturalized Garden by Lorraine Johnson, 2001
- 100 Easy-to-Grow Native Plants by Lorraine Johnson, 2005

For more information please contact:
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