Availability of Native Plants

As more people discover the benefits of replacing non-native plants and lawns with native gardens, more of these plants are finding their way to the marketplace. Spring and fall plant sales held by some WNPS chapters, county Conservation Districts, and other horticultural organizations are a reputable source of native plants. The WNPS web site posts a list of resources for native plants and seeds, listing local nurseries that carry a good collection of native plants. Updated yearly, the Specialty Nursery Guide, NW Washington Edition is another handy, free resource.

You can promote the protection of wild plant populations by purchasing natives from nurseries offering plants that have been grown from nursery stock and that were legally collected or salvaged. Nurseries often carry plants that have been rescued from logging or development sites. If you have permission from property owners, you may be able to salvage plants yourself from areas about to be disturbed. It is important to salvage carefully and at the appropriate season to avoid damaging the plants, their companions, and their intricate, fragile habitats. At no time is it ethical to collect any whole or part of listed rare plants for personal or commercial use. The Washington Natural Heritage Program in the Department of Natural Resources has more information on the endangered, threatened and sensitive plants of our state.

Learn more about plants in the Pacific Northwest

Join organizations like the Washington Native Plant Society (WNPS) to learn more about the benefits of native plants. Each spring WNPS offers a comprehensive study course to educate and train native plant enthusiasts to become native plant stewards. Throughout the year, field trips and lectures are offered to enrich our understanding and appreciation of native plants and native habitat.

Some Useful Resources

Grow Your Own Native Landscape. Item MISC0273, WSU Cooperative Extension, Revised 6/99. (call 1-800-723-1763)

Washington Native Plant Society
6310 NE 74th St., Ste 215E, Seattle WA 98115
website www.wnps.org
e-mail wnps@wnps.org

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Create a Forest Sanctuary in Your Own Backyard Using Northwest Native Plants

These are busy times. With so many daily distractions and activities competing for our attention, imagine the comfort and delight of visiting your own native forest retreat at the end of a hectic day. Pause to watch the waning sun as it filters through the delicate leaves of one maple (Acer circinatum). Or linger to observe butterflies sipping nectar from deliciously scented mock orange (Philadelphus lewisi) blossoms. Peek beneath the leaves of wild ginger (Asarum caudatum) and find several trumpet-shaped exotic flowers awaiting your discovery.

Impossible dream? Not at all. The Pacific Northwest is blessed with a temperate, marine climate that encourages the growth of luxuriant evergreen and deciduous herbs, shrubs and trees. There is probably some place in your yard that can be transformed into a quiet sanctuary.

Creating and maintaining a native plant sanctuary is not only possible, it is a satisfying, and aesthetically pleasing gardening activity. Once established, a native plant garden is a beautiful, low-maintenance garden that will bring years of discovery and delight.

What Are Native Plants?

Native plants grew naturally in this region before European settlers arrived. They were not introduced here from other countries or regions.

Why Use Native Plants?

- native plants have co-evolved with native insects, fungi, plant diseases and wildlife for thousands of years, thus optimizing their survival chances
- native plants attract native wildlife, many of which depend on the plants for shelter, food or larval development
- native groundcovers significantly slow the spread of invasive weeds
- native plants are adapted to growing in this region’s soil and water
Planning Your Forest Sanctuary

Before getting started, stroll through a regional, lowland forest. Bring a camera for documentation and a field guide for native plant identification — *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast* by Pojar and Mackinnon is an excellent, easy-to-use reference. Take note, both visually and on paper, which plants you see growing together and their growing conditions. Observe the following about the plant communities you visit:

- what is the soil like; is it full of organic matter and leaf mold or is it shallow and coarse
- how moist is the soil and why (shade, underground spring, standing water)
- how much sun or shade reaches the forest floor
- how many different plant species are growing in a 5 ft x 5 ft area
- which plant species grow in the canopy, understory and forest floor
- do plants grow densely or are they more widely spaced
- which non-living components (nurse logs, stumps, rocks, brush piles) do you see

![Nature has a very long time to work out the details. Follow nature and your garden will reward you.]

Evaluating Your Planting Space

Few of us are fortunate to have yards with conditions that exactly duplicate the ecology of a regional, temperate lowland forest. However, a basic understanding of plant relationships and soil and moisture requirements can help anyone create a naturalistic habitat that mimics nature in the wild.

It is very important to work with existing conditions in your yard. Know your yard and pay attention to seasonal changes. Try to answer the following questions:

- during the course of several months, which parts of your yard receive the most sun or shade; locations that seem well suited for shade plants during the spring may end up baking in the sun during July and August
- does your soil contain sand, clay, organic matter — or some of each
- does your soil drain quickly or slowly
- are there areas that collect water and create seasonal pools
- what is the soil pH; many native plants prefer acid soil — fortunately low pH is common in native northwest soils and if not, the pH of most soils can be altered with natural soil enhancements
- are there natural features, like rocks, brush piles or dead trees that can be placed to encourage wildlife and create a more natural look
- is there existing lawn; you might decide to remove the lawn in stages when you discover that your forest uses less water and never needs mowing

Designing A Small Scale Forest

Once you’ve evaluated your planting space, it’s time to start having fun with design. Measure the width and length of the space and transfer those measurements onto graph paper. You will probably have to do more than one drawing. Remember that there are few straight lines in nature, so add a generous number of curves to your forest perimeter. Place plants as they would occur in an actual forest, so that an integrated, naturalized effect is achieved by using an irregular planting scheme. The addition of berms, elevated planting mounds of soil, will also add interest to your design.

Having a loose design plan in mind will help you select plants appropriate to the location you are planting. Visit nurseries that carry native plants. Several organizations, including the Washington Native Plant Society, have seasonal sales of native plants. Use a reference book to make sure that you’ve noted the Latin (scientific) and common names of all plants you’ve selected. Many plants have similar common names, but are not actually native to this region. The only way to know for sure is to check the Latin.

If you are confused about which plants should be planted with other plants, and under which soil, moisture and light conditions, there are several books to help you understand plant associations. *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest* by Art Kruckeberg is a favorite and valuable resource. Of course, nature is the best guide. As you work on your design, return often to your favorite forest refuge to study natural plant associations and environmental preferences.

Beginning with a Few Favorites

To start with, there are several nearly foolproof plants that will beautify your yard and boost your gardening confidence. *Vine maple* (*Acer circinatum*) is a beautiful understory shrub or small tree; *evergreen huckleberry* (*Vaccinium ovatum*) and *low Oregon grape* (*Berberis nervosa*) both attract wildlife and are green year-round; *Indian plum* (*Oemleria cerasiformis*) is an early bloomer with delicate light green leaves to follow; *sword fern* (*Polystichum munitum*) is evergreen and very adaptable under varying conditions; *trailing yellow violet* (*Viola sempervirens*) and *twinflower* (*Linnaea borealis*) are diminutive and hardy groundcovers. With just a few easy to grow forest plants, you’re on your way to creating a native garden!

![Tending the Forest for the First Year]

Once native plants become established, they nearly take care of themselves, so the lucky gardener has more time to observe visiting native birds and butterflies. For the first year or so, water plants according to their needs. Mulch generously with organic materials to prevent the surrounding soils and roots from drying out. If plants are well cared for during their infancy, they will need little attention after they’ve become established.