

# GARDENING WITH NATIVE PLANTS

By Valerie Rose

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## **Add beauty, resilience by welcoming native plants into your garden.**

Have you admired wonderful drifts of wildflowers in our mountains, meadows, and woods? Inhaled the rich sweetness from the blossoms of a mock orange shrub? Been dazzled by vine maples turning scarlet in the cool autumn air?

These are just a few of around 3,000 vascular plants native to northwest Washington. Each has evolved to thrive in different parts of our region's widely varied ecosystems, from mudflats and estuaries to alpine meadows. Many native plants can enhance your garden, attract beneficial insects, and help conserve water. Some 'exotics' (plants native to other parts of the world) require gardeners to try recreating the exotic's ecosystem-of-origin, with extra heat and water, artificial light and shelter, extra fertilizer, and more pest control. Native plants are much more self-sufficient.

In the right setting, native plants won't require much care. One of my favorites is a lowly groundcover with a delightful name: Kinnikinnik (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*.) This hardy plant keeps its deep green leaves all year. Once established, it is drought-tolerant. Kinnikinnik is popular in home and professional landscapes, where fussy, fragile plants won't survive.

To welcome native plants to your garden, first consider the ecosystem(s.) Is it sunny and well-drained, or shady and damp? High elevation or on the Skagit flats? Sandy or clay soil? Noting these characteristics will help you find plants that will be at home in your yard.

## **Right Plant, Right Place**

Each native plant performs a role in its habitat, and you can learn from nature's wisdom. To control erosion on the edge of a stream plant red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*.) willows, Oregon ash (<http://green.kingcounty.gov/GoNative/Plant.aspx?Act=view&PlantID=8>*Fraxinus latifolia*) and vine maple (*Acer circinatum*.) To attract hummingbirds, plant red flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*) and orange honeysuckle (*Lonicera ciliosa*.) Kids and adults will enjoy huckleberries (<http://green.kingcounty.gov/GoNative/Plant.aspx?Act=view&PlantID=20>*Vaccinium ovatum*) and native blackberries (*Rubus ursinus*.)

Be sure to use the Latin name to get the plant you want. If you go to a nursery and ask for "mock orange" you could end up with the European *Philadelphus coronarius*. Our northwest native mock orange is *Philadelphus lewisii*.

Do you notice something historically significant about that last plant name? Yes, 'lewisii' is connected with the Lewis & Clark expedition. Merriweather Lewis' botanical findings are memorialized in many plants' scientific names. As a naturalist, Lewis was directed by President Thomas Jefferson to collect plant samples from the 'mysterious west.' Several of these species were new to the Euro-American settlers, while generations of native peoples used many of the plants for food, clothing, medicines and tools.

Choosing native plants for your land means identifying those growing in the wild in similar environments. Read books or websites on native plants and their habitats. Go for a hike with a notebook and identification guide. And be sure to visit the Native Plant Garden in Skagit County.

### Skagit's Own Native Plant Garden

We are fortunate to have many local experts and students of native plants, in the Salal Chapter of the Washington Native Plant Society. Their exquisite garden is just south of the Master Gardener's Demonstration Gardens, next to the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, three miles west of Mount Vernon. The Native Plant Garden is a wonderful place to learn about varieties of plants that are found near ponds and streams, in alpine elevations, grassy meadows and other ecosystems.



Red flowering currant, a native Northwest shrub, is known by gardeners and hummingbirds for its brilliant display of carmine blooms. **Photo courtesy Christine Kitch.**

In the spring, you can also enjoy plant walks led by members of the Native Plant Society, in cooperation with the Anacortes Parks Department. The Salal Chapter's work parties are also great opportunities to learn about this important part of our ecosystems.

Volunteering with the Native Plant Society is a great way to learn about the amazing world of native plants. (See InfoBox for details.) In addition to learning to identify plants, volunteers also learn how to propagate them from seeds, cuttings or other parts. And by attending the next work party at the Native Plant Garden, you'll be rewarded with a coupon for a free plant at the group's annual sale on Saturday, April 23. What a lovely way to begin, or add to, your garden's collection of natives.

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Valerie Rose is a Washington State University/Skagit County Master Gardener. Questions may be submitted to the WSU Skagit County Extension office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233. 360-428-4270 or <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG>.

## Join the Party! Free Skagit Native Plant Work Party

- What:** Meet delightful native plants and their friends, members of the Salal Chapter of The Washington Native Plant Society.
- Where:** Native Plant Garden, located next to the WSU Skagit County Master Gardener's Demonstration Gardens, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway.)
- When:** Saturday March 12, 10 AM – 3 PM
- Where:** Work clothing, gardening gloves, sun and/or rain protection.
- Bring:** Lunch, your favorite garden tools, and a container for water (there is a Water fountain at the garden.) The hosts provide juice, cookies and friendly knowledge.
- Extra treat:** Work party participants receive a coupon for a free native plant start at the annual Native Plant sale on Saturday, April 23.
- Info:** Susan Alaynick (360) 659-8792 or [s\\_alaynick@hotmail.com](mailto:s_alaynick@hotmail.com)



Above left: Roar Irgens of Mount Vernon, a member of the Salal Chapter of the Native Plant Society, admires a shopper's selection at the 2010 plant sale. This year's sale will be held April 23. Above Right: Pam Pritzil, a member of the Salal Chapter of the Native Plant Society, talks with Roxie Rochat from Stanwood during the 2010 plant sale. The next sale is April 23. Photos courtesy Christine Kitch.

## RESOURCES

- Washington Native Plant Society, Salal Chapter: [www.wnps.org/salal/](http://www.wnps.org/salal/) or [s\\_alaynick@hotmail.com](mailto:s_alaynick@hotmail.com) or (360) 659-8792
- Native Plants: Identifying, Propagating and Landscaping, WSU Extension: <http://gardening.wsu.edu/text/nwnative.htm>
- Native Plants for NW Washington Gardens, Washington Native Plant Society: [www.wnps.org/landscaping/herbarium/index.html](http://www.wnps.org/landscaping/herbarium/index.html)
- Northwest Native Plant Guide, King County: <http://green.kingcounty.gov/gonative/Plan.aspx?Act=list>
- The Botany of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Lewis and Clark College: [www.ucdp.uc.edu/lewisandclark/exhibits/botany/](http://www.ucdp.uc.edu/lewisandclark/exhibits/botany/)
- *Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest; an Illustrated Guide*, Arthur Kruckeberg. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003
- *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast: Washington, Oregon, British Columbia and Alaska*, Jim Pojar and Andy Mackinnon. Vancouver, Canada: Lone Pine Publishing, 1994
- *Native American Ethnobotany*, D. E. Moerman. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 1998
- *Lewis and Clark's Green World: The Expedition and its Plants*, Earle, A. Scott and James L. Reveal. Helena, Montana: Farcountry Press, 2003