

# Native Gardening

By Mary Rose

October 10, 2008

## **For beauty, sustainability, and species-preservation, grow plants native to northwest Washington.**

Have you admired those wonderful drifts of wildflowers in our mountains, meadows, and woods? Fall is a great time to plan and start them in your own garden. By growing our native plants, you practice sustainability, preserve species, and make a lovely display for all to admire. Since our climate is dry in summer and wet in winter, most of our plants start their yearly growth cycle in the autumn, as soon as the first rains come. In summer they often rest (aestivate), unlike plants from elsewhere, which rest in the winter. And, your plants, whether from seed or set-outs, will have strong root systems and be ready to take off and grow big healthy tops. When top growth starts in late winter to early spring, they will be ready to bloom at their special times.

Starting native plants from seed is easy. Many can be planted directly in the beds where you want them to live, watered in, and left to grow. Keep them free of vigorous weedy competition, and let nature do the watering unless we have a long dry spell in fall. Or, grow seedlings in a flat or pot to set out when they are big enough. Your container should be at least four inches deep. Native plants have deep roots that grow fast, before the tops do much. Fill with soil or planting mix; sprinkle the seeds on top. Lightly press them in if tiny, or sprinkle your mix over them just to cover. Place the container outside, out of severe wind or rain. Almost all native plants need winter chill to germinate and grow properly. Most will bloom the next year. The seedling bulbs, however, need two years in their container with good feeding and watering before they are ready to set out in their permanent place in the garden.

To design a native plant bed, first consider the environment you have to use. Is it sunny and well-drained, or shady and damp? Use one of the many Northwest wildflower books to choose plants which grow in a similar environment. Or go for a hike and have a look. By identifying those you want by their scientific (botanical) rather than common names, you will be able to access a great deal of information on each plant and to locate sources of it easily with a search on the Internet. If you are not Web-savvy, go to the library and ask the librarian to show you how to search. It's easy! Then read everything you can on the plants and their native habitats. By then, visions of wildflowers in beautiful colors and forms will be dancing in your head! You will be well equipped to locate the right spot in your garden for your display.



**Woolly sunflower (*Eriophyllum lanatum*) will expand its circle of golden yellow for many weeks in the late spring and summer.** Photo by Mary Rose.



**Darkthroat shootingstar (*Dodecatheon pulchellum*) prefers a mildly acidic soil (6.1 to 6.5 pH) and regular drinks of water, and has been used medicinally by the Okanagan-Colville and Blackfoot Indians.** Photo by Mary Rose.

Most nurseries have some native plants and can advise you on how to grow them. There are several sources of local seeds and plants as well. With a little research, you can bring the beauty of our native plants into your own backyard.



**Penn Cove iris (*Iris missouriensis*)** is the local form from the San Juan Islands, which is nearly extinct. It is the only form of *Iris missouriensis* that should be planted here, to preserve its unique beauty. Photo by Pat de la Chapelle.



**Black Sarana (*Fritillaria camschatcensis*)** is outstanding in a pot or in a moist bed in the ground. It is native from coastal Washington north, across the Bering Strait, and into northern Japan. Photo by Mary Rose.

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## SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPING WORKSHOP

- **What:** “Designing Sustainable Landscapes” — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, will guide participants through the process of planning beautiful, low-cost landscapes that are functional, easy to maintain, and environmentally friendly. Presented by WSU/Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU/Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.
- **When:** 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 21
- **Where:** WSU-Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Highway 536, west of Mount Vernon
- **Speaker:** Jayne Uerling, certified master naturalist and professional wetland specialist
- **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.



**The Western trillium (*Trillium ovatum*)** is a lovely shade flower that is white when the flowers open, then becomes pink and rose as they mature. It may live fifty years. Photo by Jason Miller.



**Pink fawn lily (*Erythronium revolutum*)** grows in our river valleys, often in silty soil. It is happy in most local garden sites. Photo by Mary Rose.



**Davidson's penstemon (*Penstemon davidsonii*)** is found creeping across high granite cliffs in the Cascades. Here, it grows well in a pot or rock garden.

Photo by Mary Rose



**White fawn lily (*Erythronium oregonum*)** grows abundantly on Mt. Erie and other places where humans haven't disturbed it. Photo by Mary Rose.



**This exquisite orchid is the small-flowered cyrtipedium (*Cypripedium parviflorum*),** but the flowers are anything but small. It likes light shade, moderate moisture, and no competition from other plants, so give it room. It will add several more blooms yearly if fed monthly with half-strength liquid fertilizer. Photo by Mary Rose.



**Our common stonecrop, otherwise known as spoon-leaved stonecrop (*Sedum spathulifolium*),** creeps over rocks and embankments all along the coast and into high mountains. With sun or cold weather, its rosettes become rose-red: great winter "flowers" in the rock garden.

Photo by Mary Rose



**Columbia lily (*Lilium columbianum*)** grows in forest edges throughout the Pacific Northwest. It is longlived and will get progressively bigger, with more flowers each year. To keep it content in your landscape, try watering monthly with half-strength liquid fertilizer.

Photo by Jason Miller.



**Tough-leaved iris (*Iris tenax*)** was used by our coastal native people for fishnets and other weaving. They planted it, and many other plants, where they would need them in the future. Photo by Mary Rose.



**Cardwell's penstemon (*Penstemon cardwellii*)** is usually lavender, but this is a beautiful pink form.

Photo by Mary Rose



**Big-leaved rhododendron (*Rhododendron macrophyllum*)** is our coastal species. Its huge blooms may be rose, pink, or pure white. Photo by Mary Rose.