

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener

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Much has been written about the benefits of planting wildflowers and native trees and shrubs to attract wildlife into your backyard. Although native plants are well adapted to the growing conditions in our area, not all are easy to grow as they may require quite specific microclimates or soils. Luckily, many are happy in a wide range of sites. If you want some ideas for native plants that establish well and perform a wide range of duties, here is a selection of shrubs, groundcovers, and wildflowers you might like to try when starting out.

The following shrubs will tolerate most sites in your garden (sunny or shady, dry or moist) and all provide seeds or fruit for birds, and either leaves for butterflies in their larval stages, or nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies later in life. Most are fast growing and all will grow densely enough to create thickets where birds and small animals can find shelter from predators, wind, and rain.

Wild roses grow in a variety of habitats. Baldhip roses (*Rosa gymnocarpa*) grow in both shaded and sunny sites. They are usually armed with numerous soft, straight prickles. Nootka roses (*Rosa nutkana*) prefer open areas and have a pair of large prickles at the base of each leaf and otherwise smooth stems. Both have single pink flowers. Aphids feast on the young shoots, and songbirds feast on the aphids. The leaves provide building materials for leaf-cutter bees and sustenance for mourning cloak butterfly larvae.

Red-flowering currants (*Ribes sanguinem*) are the harbingers of spring and when they blossom, hummingbirds soon follow. They tolerate shade but usually grow in clearings, and they prefer their soil on the dry side. They grow 6 to 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide, and their handsome blossoms are at home in even the most manicured landscapes.

Variety enhances wildlife habitats, so it's a good idea to include something evergreen.

Tall Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) looks a bit like holly and grows 6 to 8 feet tall and almost as wide. Its blue-black fruit provides food for birds and small mammals, and its bright yellow flowers provide nectar for hummingbirds, orchard mason bees, and painted lady butterflies. Oregon grapes do not transplant easily but should thrive if you buy well-rooted container plants. You can plant a few of them together in places where you'd like an informal screen or barrier.

For wet sites in your backyard, try red-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) in sun or shade (if it's happy, it can grow to 20 feet tall) and evergreen salal (*Gaultheria shallon*). In dry, sunny conditions, salal grows to 2 feet; in wet, shady conditions, it grows to 8 feet. It is slower to establish than the other shrubs mentioned, and once it has a foothold, it is difficult to remove.

Around the shrubs, add some groundcovers to keep down the weeds and provide protection for reptiles and insects. Try low Oregon grape (*Mahonia nervosa*), kinnikinnik (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), and wild strawberries (*Fragaria* spp.). All are drought tolerant. Low Oregon grape prefers shade, wild strawberries tolerate it, and kinnikinnik prefers sun. All provide fruit for birds and small mammals, and nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies. The kinnikinnik also provides leaves for butterflies in their larval stages. Coast strawberries (*Fragaria chiloensis*), the most vigorous of the wild strawberries, will take light foot traffic and need to be kept to areas where they cannot dominate other plants.

To add color to your native plantings, consider wildflowers such as spring-flowering camas (*Camas quamash* and *C. leichtlinii*), native red columbines (*Aquilegia formosa*), and native bleeding hearts (*Dicentra formosa*). In dry sunny grasslands or wet meadow areas, the

bulbs of common camas (*C. quamash*) or the taller great blue camas (*C. leichtlinii*) push up full heads of deep blue flowers that provide nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies. Native red columbines grow to 3 feet in sunny meadows or alongside streams. Hummingbirds are attracted to their red and yellow flower spurs, and sparrows, juncos, and finches feast on their seeds. Native bleeding hearts enjoy moist, shaded sites with good drainage, where *Clodius parnassius* butterfly larvae eat their leaves and hummingbirds visit their pink, heart-shaped flowers. At the end of the season, ants scatter their seeds, so do not be surprised to find new patches in the spring.

For more information on growing native plants, go to <http://pnwplants.wsu.edu/> and click “Find a plant” in the NorthWest Plants Database system. Remember that even if a plant is listed as drought tolerant, it will require regular watering for the first season or two until its root system is well established.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.