



Gardening

w i t h t h e

Natives

.....

Sometimes the most successful garden plants are those that lived there long before you did! BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

Indigenous species—by nature modest dwellers of local woodlands, marshes, and meadows—have emerged from behind the scenes in the southern landscape to stand in the spotlight. Enthusiasts are incorporating them into established gardens, even planning new beds that cast these unassuming plants in leading roles.

This movement started with small groups of environmental activists who organized “plant rescues” in areas threatened by development—land that had once been home to native shrubs and wildflowers. As orphaned refugees found new homes in private gardens, those that thrived were shared with other gardeners. Word quickly spread about the benefits of these plucky survivors.

Plant species are broadly grouped into two classes: native and exotic. Exotics are simply plants

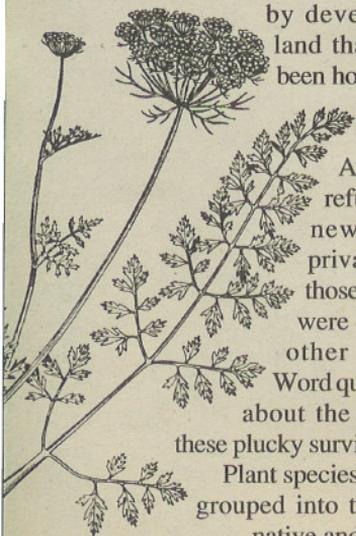
that came to us from other countries. Even classic southern favorites like camellias and gardenias (both of Asian origin) are considered immigrants.

Natives, in the strictest sense of the word, include only those plants that were growing in North America before the arrival of European settlers. Looser definitions may include familiar wildflowers such as Queen Anne’s lace (*Daucus carota*), which escaped cultivation long ago to thrive in fields and along roadsides. Conversely, the common orange daylily, also naturalized in the Southeast, is of Asian origin and is virtually never considered a native.

Aficionados of native plants have to pay attention to Latin names, because a familiar flower genus may include some species that are native as well as some that are exotic. An example is wisteria, long associated with the South. The familiar rampant, invasive vines came here from Asia. Yet there is also a native species, *Wisteria frutescens*, that is worth seeking out for its more restrained growth habit and paler, lilac-colored blossoms.



HELIANTHUS
ANGUSTIFOLIUS



DAUCUS CAROTA

Aside from their ornamental value, native plants offer many practical benefits to home landscapes:

■ **Environmental concerns.** Native plants have long been part of a balanced ecosystem, able to hold their own against local pests. Less spraying means fewer chemical pollutants. In addition, many wildflower species grow naturally in lean soils and so perform best without fertilizer, reducing the amount of nitrates that accumulate in groundwater. Less time spent spraying and fertilizing translates into more leisure time in the garden!

■ **Ease of cultivation.** Because native plants are well adapted to local conditions, they often get by without the coddling that other species sometimes require. For example, European wild ginger (*Asarum europaeum*), a creeping evergreen, is



PASSIFLORA INCARNATA

■ **Passion flower** (*Passiflora incarnata*). The unusual flowers of this species, coupled with a stretch of the imagination, inspired its common name. By assigning various parts of the Crucifixion (Passion) story to corresponding

■ **Trout lily** (*Erythronium americanum*). This diminutive member of the lily family received its common moniker when someone noticed the brownish markings on its mottled leaves. They bear a striking resemblance to the pattern found on the back of a brown trout.

Americans for war paint as well as a dye for crafts and clothing.

■ **Bloodroot** (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). The pure-white, lily-shaped blooms of this woodlander seem paradoxical for a plant whose common and botanical names (from the Latin *sanguis*) both refer to blood. Yet the plant's fleshy root yields a red juice that was used by Native



SANGUINARIA
CANADENSIS

floral parts, the fringed blossoms become a passion play. Petals and sepals represent the disciples, pistils the nails, and the circular fringe the crown of thorns.

■ **Yaupon holly** (*Ilex vomitoria*). This native, small-leaved holly gets

its Latin name from a chemical within its foliage that acts as an emetic—a substance that induces vomiting. During religious rituals, Native Americans drank large quantities of a black tea made from the yaupon to cleanse the body of impurities.

■ **American twinleaf** (*Jeffersonia diphylla*). A small, spring-blooming woodland native, twinleaf was given its scientific name by botanist William Bartram—in honor of his friend Thomas Jefferson, an avid gardener and naturalist. Only one other species of *Jeffersonia* exists (*J. dubia*), and it is native to Japan.

W h a t ' s i n a Name?

The names of native plants often reflect colorful histories. Collecting these stories is part of the fun. Here are a few to contemplate:

offered by mail-order nurseries as a ground cover for shade—even though it can fare poorly in southern gardens. A more well-adapted alternative is *A. virginicum*, which hails from Virginia and the Carolinas and is, not surprisingly, much more heat-tolerant.

Many southeastern natives do well in our torrid summers without supplemental water. For full-sun areas that are difficult to irrigate, try black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* sp.), swamp sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*), and sundrops (*Oenothera fruticosa*).

■ **Habitat preservation.** As components of a balanced ecosystem, native plants are invaluable to wildlife. Many birds and small mammals rely on woodland plants for shelter and nesting materials. Berries and seeds provide food for migrating flocks as well as for local populations. Red blossoms in particular are attractive fodder for hummingbirds—try cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and bee balm (*Monarda didyma*). Also, beneficial insects and butterflies lay eggs on species that provide the most nourishing food for emerging larvae and caterpillars.

■ **Conservation of endangered species.** According to the Center for Plant Conservation, one out of every ten plants native to the United States is in danger of extinction. Since this loss is attributable mostly to vanishing habitats, it makes sense to provide homes for native plants whenever possible. Some natives, like lady's slipper orchid (*Cypripedium pubescens*) and Venus's flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*), can survive only in specific cultural conditions. Others, like trillium (*Trillium* sp.),



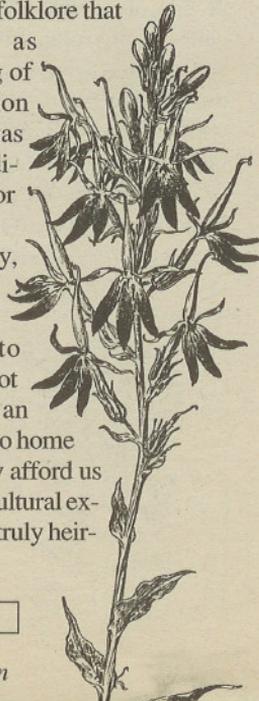
TIARELLA
CORDIFOLIA

multiply slowly and must remain undisturbed in order to do so. If your property includes a stream, a boggy area, or a woodland, you may be able to cultivate some of the species that are becoming increasingly rare. But in the true spirit of conservation, buy only nursery-propagated plants—never those that were collected in the wild.

START YOUR OWN THEME PARK

There is always something pleasant and satisfying in planning a “theme” garden, even if the theme is not as readily apparent to visitors as it would be, for example, in an all-white garden. For example, you may enjoy finding all the shade plants native to your part of Georgia, or all the plants commonly harvested for medicinal use in 1776. As you collect plants, try to collect some of the folklore that surrounds them as well—the meaning of the plant's common name; whether it was used for food, medicine, fabric dyes, or love potions.

A neglected legacy, native plants are hardy, low-maintenance additions to southern gardens. Not only do they add an easy, subtle beauty to home landscapes, but they afford us an opportunity for cultural expression. These are truly heirloom plants.



LOBELIA CARDINALIS

N a t i v e P l a n t s
f o r
Southeastern Gardens

Perennials for Sun

- Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*)
Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia* sp.)
Blue star (*Amsonia angustifolia*)
Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Gayfeather, blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)
Hardy ageratum, mistflower (*Eupatorium coelestinum*)
Obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*)
Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
Stokes aster (*Stokesia laevis*)



ASCLEPIAS TUBEROSA

- Swamp sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*)
Tickseed (*Coreopsis* sp.)
Wild indigo, false indigo (*Baptisia australis*)

Perennials for Shade

- Alumroot, coral bells (*Heuchera americana*)
Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
Crested wood iris (*Iris cristata*)

- Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)
Fringed bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*)



IRIS CRISTATA

- Green-and-Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)
Turtlehead (*Chelone* sp.)
White wood aster (*Aster divaricata*)
Wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
Woodland blue phlox, wild sweet William (*Phlox divaricata*)

Shrubs and Small Trees

- Yellow anise tree, star anise (*Illicium parviflorum*)
Carolina silver-bell (*Halesia carolina*)
Dwarf fothergilla (*Fothergilla gardenii*)
Inkberry holly (*Ilex glabra*)
Piedmont azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*)
Serviceberry, Juneberry (*Amelanchier arborea*)
Wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*)



AMELANCHIER ARBOREA

MAIL-ORDER SOURCES
for *Southeastern Native Plants*

Autumn Hill Nursery
4256 Earney Rd.
Woodstock, GA 30188
770-442-3901
<http://home.flash.net/~gardenga>

Elk Mountain Nursery
P.O. Box 599
Asheville, NC 28802
828-251-9622
www.elk-mountain.com

Niche Gardens
1111 Dawson Rd.
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
919-967-0078
www.nichegdn.com

Woodlanders Inc.
1128 Colleton Ave.
Aiken, SC 29801
803-648-7522
www.woodlanders.net

➔ **Spinning the Web:** Go to www.almanac.com and click on Article Links 2001 for Web sites related to this article. —The Editors