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**10 great
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Return of the natives

10 great prairie plants to grow in your garden this year

By Darcy Maulsby

Native prairie plants, once disparaged as weeds, have become the stars of many environmentally-friendly Midwest gardens. Known for their low maintenance, tolerance to drought and cold, erosion control and natural pest resistance, many native plants also boast colorful blooms and striking forms that provide a smorgasbord of nectar, pollen and seed to attract bees, butterflies and birds.

"With the current green movement, attitudes towards native plants are beginning to change, and that's great for the wildlife and insects," says Kathy Hale-Johnson who runs Simply Native Nursery near Alexis, Ill., and has grown native plants for more than six years. "No matter what trouble spots you have in your landscape, there's a native plant for every garden."

She will speak about native plants at 2 p.m. April 18 at the 2009 Earth Week Fair at the QCCA Expo Center, 2621 4th Ave., Rock Island. For details about the fair, turn to Resources at the back of the magazine.

If this is your first year to grow native plants, be patient, advised Hale-Johnson. "Prairie plants require several years to reach their mature height. Every year, however, you'll be pleasantly surprised by how hardy and attractive natives can be."

If you'd like to add native plants to your garden in 2009, Kathy suggests her top 10 favorites:

1 New Jersey tea. This extremely tough, compact, rounded shrub features white blooms in the late spring. Although it's a very slow grower that eventually reaches 2 to 3 feet tall, this small, deciduous shrub can work well in the middle of a border or as an anchor on the ends of a flower bed. The New Jersey tea shrub is easily grown in a variety of soils in full sun to part shade. "We have clay soil, and our New Jersey tea is in the sun all day," says Hale-Johnson, who notes that hummingbirds feed off the insects that pollinate this shrub. "It even survives browsing from rabbits and deer."

2 Prairie smoke. A member of the rose family, this perennial is distinguished by its wispy seed-heads. The plant, which blooms in late spring through early summer, needs good drainage, such as sandy loam. "I'm not sure if prairie smoke is prettier when it's blooming or after it is done blooming," says Hale-Johnson, who keeps the plant in the front of her borders. As an added bonus, the foliage turns red in the fall.

3 Little bluestem. From its bluish-green foliage and silvery seed-heads to its rusty fall color, little bluestem is a striking ornamental grass that delights the senses. "I like the sound it makes when the wind blows through it," says Hale-Johnson. "Because it stands straight up, I leave it up over the winter not only for visual interest, but to provide seeds and cover for wildlife and pheasants." Little bluestem, which

grows 2 to 2½ feet tall, can be planted at the front of a border and pairs well with daylilies.

4 Royal catchfly. Although red is an uncommon color among prairie plants, crimson adorns the bountiful flowers of the royal catchfly, which attracts hummingbirds and butterflies. Once the royal catchfly starts blooming in mid- to late summer, it keeps blooming for weeks. These hardy plants grow best in full to partial sun, reaching a height of 2 to 3 feet.

5 Smooth beardtongue. This hummingbird magnet easily self-seeds and provides a good pollen source for bees. A relative of the penstemon family, smooth beardtongue boasts white, tubular flowers with a pink blush that bloom during the end of May into early June. "It's one of my favorite natives, and I have it

along my walkway," says Hale-Johnson. It also can be planted at the back or middle of the border.

6 Fragrant false indigo. This rounded shrub is distinguished by small, purple, bottlebrush-like flowers that bloom in the late spring and early summer. Fragrant false indigo, which is very drought tolerant and prefers good drainage, grows approximately 1 to 2 feet tall. Unfortunately, rabbits love false indigo, so you may need to place cages around the plants to protect them from damage.

7 Kansas blue star willow. With its dark green foliage, the Kansas blue star willow looks like a shrub but is a perennial that grows 2½ feet tall. Known for its light, sky-blue flowers that bloom in the spring, the plant can tolerate full sun to partial shade. Kansas blue star willow, which exhibits a straw color after the first killing frost in the fall, stands up through the winter, adding an attractive element to the garden year-round. "Also, you won't have to worry about insects harming the Kansas blue star willow during the growing season," says Hale-Johnson.

8 Black snakeroot. This versatile plant grows well in dry to damp soil conditions. The black snake-root plants on Hale-Johnson's property thrive near a dry, shady area along a windbreak of pine trees. Although it typically grows 4 feet tall, black snake-root can reach 6 feet tall in wetter conditions. The fern-like foliage of black snakeroot grows in attractive clumps, and the pristine, white, bottlebrush-like flowers can light up the shady spots of your garden.

9 Summersweet. This shade-tolerant shrub provides a sweet fragrance when the white flowers are in bloom. Summersweet, which can grow in wet soils, offers several noteworthy varieties. Shrubs with white flowers typically grow 3 feet tall, while pink-flowering cultivars can grow 4 to 6 feet or taller. Summersweet is generally free of insect and disease problems, says Hale-Johnson.

10 Upland white aster. The white flowers on this vigorous bloomer, which look like a cross between a daisy and an aster, debut in late summer and continue into October. Upland white asters, which grow 1 to 2 feet tall, can grow in a variety of conditions, from dry to moist soils.

For details about the 2009 Earth Week Fair, turn to Resources, page 38.



Native plants offer a variety of benefits, including the following:

Drought tolerance once the plants are established.

Cold tolerance, even in years with little snow cover.

Exceptional erosion and runoff control, due to the plants' extensive root systems.

Natural resistance to many pests and diseases.

A source of nectar, pollen and seed for bees, butterflies and birds.

Low maintenance.

Options for the toughest garden conditions, including dry shade, wet soils, very dry soils and heavy clay.



Kathy Hale-Johnson tends native plants in her greenhouse in Alexis, Ill. (Photos by Paul Colletti / Radish)

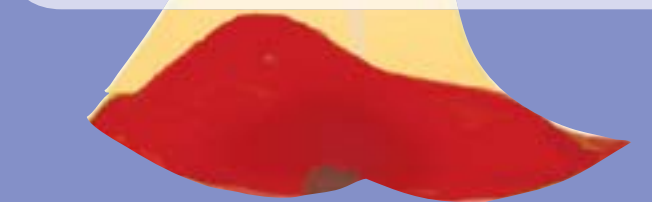
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