**The Beauty of Native Plants  *Designed by Mother Nature to thrive***The essence of living green is working *with* nature, not against it. I can think of no better example than planting your garden and yard with plants that are native to the place you live.

The beauty of these species is that they know in their genes how to defend against local pests and diseases, deal with the climate and get by with conditions on the ground. Their ancestors have seen it all—and evolved to cope. As a result, native plants don't need your daily ministrations to survive. Once established, they don't even need regular watering.

The same can rarely be said of "introduced" or "exotic" species, which evolved to succeed in other environments. While some naturalize easily (or even take over in the case of invasive plants), most can't make it on their own. Your help is necessary for their survival—and not just at the start, when all plants need special treatment, but on an ongoing basis.

Natural landscaping with native species is a breeze in comparison. In a normal year, the plants will practically take care of themselves after establishment, saving you time, effort and money. Moreover, you won't run the risk of exposure to toxic fertilizers or pesticides because none will be needed.

For the environment, there are equally impressive benefits. They include less water waste, less polluted runoff, more wildlife habitat and greater biodiversity. It's a win-win situation.

So, what exactly are native species and how do you go about finding and choosing them?

In the U.S., native plants are generally defined as species that were in an area prior to the arrival of European settlers. To find out what the native plants are in your area, you'll need to do some research. Good sources of information are:

* Local nurseries specializing in native plants (go first to be educated, not to buy)
* A nearby botanic garden
* Park rangers at a nature area in your neck of the woods
* The [**native plant society in your state**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=SrTxZGLhFIX5HpQVOEc_AA) or, even better, local area
* [**The Wildflower Center's species map**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=cXTTiA5R_IM3tCBJZAzxAA) to find native plants by state and [**native plant database**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=H7IWDSvB7-V-DSJWUCIcig) to look up species.
* [**Plant Native**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=1jA6kaeH-3pjYgkeJAdtFA)'s native plant nurseries and regional plant lists
* [**The USDA Plant Database**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=15s7GPPux_OtmwQLEhsOKQ), which has information on both native and introduced species, along with a vast collection of images

Keep in mind the obvious: not every area of a state is the same. Most states include more than one ecoregion where different things naturally grow.

Nor do ecoregions respect state boundaries. For instance, the shoreline areas of Brooklyn, where I live, share more in common, ecologically speaking, with coastal areas of New England than most other parts of New York State.

For this reason, you might want to narrow the field of your search to your particular area and, beyond, to your own property, which may not be typical for your area at all. Whether because of prior development or a unique microclimate, it might be wetter or warmer or rockier or...who knows?

In fact, identifying the properties of your property is, ideally, the first step you would take—before you even think about looking up plants, native or otherwise. The second step is figuring out what you want to do with your property. Only then should you start looking into species. Plant Native offers an [**excellent guide**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=FW2Jfux_2ZwKAty8-DNNwA) to the whole process.

Finally, if you have been concerned about the plight of monarch butterflies and bees—or the fate of our food supply should pollinator numbers drop too low—or the decline in songbirds—or the state of our water—consider planting one of these:

* [**A monarch butterfly waystation**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=Zai1F7RbqGTrX0igweKpDw)
* [**A bee garden**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=m7bzjCp5fOXCinzvG-EyAQ)
* [**A pollinator garden**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=0UXMZX2twn-8Iz5qiHnMXA)
* [**A bird-friendly garden**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=lS0AyPXhA0J1NF9R3CFGcA)
* [**A *Certified Wildlife Garden***](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=RWZMy120vbgdF1D8ea9sCw)
* [**A rain garden**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=MDcKsPoJ76FrDyHkYq1xpg)

You may wonder if, when all is said and done, your native garden will be *visually* beautiful. Well, beauty, as you know, is in the eye of the beholder. Take a look at [**these examples**](http://www.nrdconline.org/site/R?i=SU9roH7PWKYvlaYwl8svBg)(not all planted exclusively with native plants but all naturally landscaped) and judge for yourself. For me, the answer is a resounding yes.

—Sheryl Eisenberg