

going native

-Southern sundrops

MELISSA M. GAW

More and more nurseries are encouraging gardeners to use native plants. And why not? Natives not only add sizzling colors to gardens from spring to fall, but also restore lost connections between plants and wildlife.

written by Rob Gardner ©2000

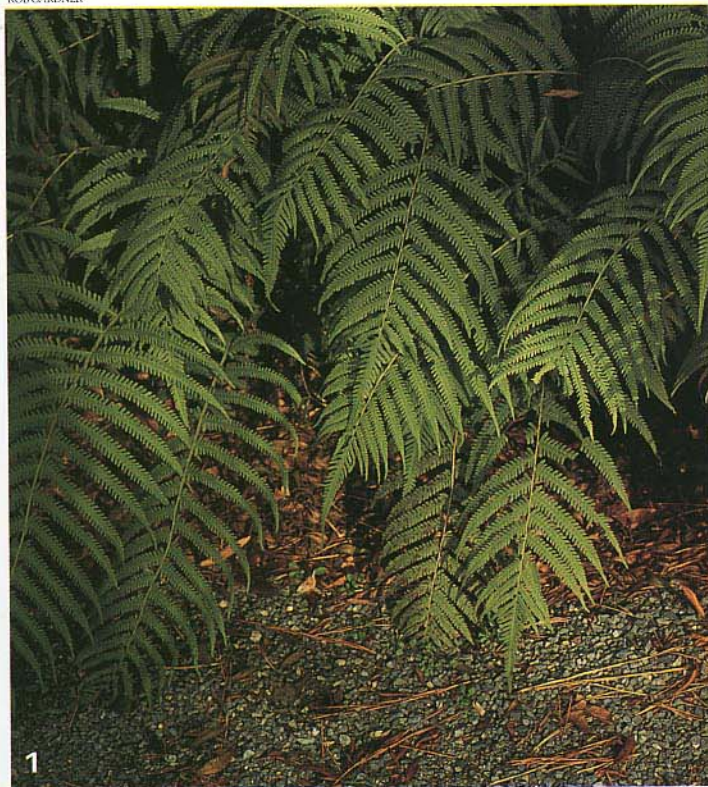
NORTH CAROLINA HAS ONE OF THE MOST VARIED GROUPS of natural communities in the country. From coastal dunes to mountain balds, from Carolina bays and longleaf pine savannas to the deep cove forests of the Southern Appalachians, our “natural gardens” nurture many hundreds of plants—delicate ferns, exotic orchids, beautiful lilies, weird insect-eating plants and some of the most stately and graceful trees and shrubs in the world. North Carolina’s treasure trove of native plants is one of the most diverse in the nation, placing only behind California and Texas.

Gardening with native plants is no longer the domain of a select few wildflower enthusiasts but has become a mainstream activity for all gardeners. Long ignored, our native plants are finally enjoying broad popularity in their homeland. European gardeners, particularly in England and Germany, have long appreciated the grace, durability and diversity of our wildflowers, and they have done extensive breeding and selection with them. Asters, goldenrods and black-eyed Susans are just a few of the many groups of our native plants that have been to European finishing school. In the United States, amateurs and professionals alike are selecting and breeding native plants. Many new selections are on the market, but in many cases, it is difficult if not impossible to improve on the plain old wild types.

In the following pages are just a few ideas on what plants you can grow, depending on the proportion of sun and shade in your garden. There are many colorful plants to choose from, and combinations that will keep your garden flowering from spring to fall.



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- 1-Southern shield fern
- 2-American alumroot
- 3-Eastern columbine

UNDERSTANDING THE KIND OF SHADE THAT IS IN YOUR GARDEN is a very important step in deciding which plants to grow. Even the most confirmed shade-loving plants don't like the deep, permanent shade cast by evergreens or the perpetual shade produced on the north side of a large building. Much more desirable is the kind of dappled shade under scattered, open trees.

You can begin to achieve the desired kind of shade in your garden by removing any invasive non-native species like Japanese honeysuckle, Russian olive, Chinese privet, English ivy and the host of other invasive alien species that are taking over natural areas and backyard gardens alike. Removing these weedy foreigners will allow a bit more sunlight to enter and make your garden much more conducive to growing native plants as well. Next, you might consider removing some low-hanging and damaged branches on remaining trees. This too will allow a little more dappled sun to enter the garden, and make your garden much easier to tend.

Foliage is the heart of all shade gardens. Spring brings a flurry of wildflowers in shady gardens: bleeding heart, various kinds of phlox, foamflower, violets, stonecrop and many others seem to bloom all at once. It is a dramatic but passing spectacle. As the growing season wears on, it is the contribution of foliage that carries any shade garden through the summer and into autumn. Plants like ferns, sedges, deciduous wild ginger, little heartleaf, American alumroot and others add texture, background and definition to shade gardens. Foliage plants add their own color to shade gardens—emerald green, chartreuse, bluish green, gray green, forest green. All blend to make a beautiful tapestry that is a variation on a single color theme.

Here are a few easy-to-acquire and easy-to-grow native plants that are beautiful choices for any shady garden.

American alumroot (*Heuchera americana*)

American alumroot is a star in a shade garden because it is such a useful native foliage plant. It is valuable in the front or middle of the shady border individually, in mass or in combination with other plants. This native usually produces five lobed, coarsely toothed leaves. New spring foliage may be washed in silver or pewter markings, which often persist. Each leaf is borne on a stem that rises from the central base of the plant. Mature plants usually grow 6 to 8 inches tall.

Small purple or greenish purple flowers usually appear in late spring on long, wiry stems rising 12 to 15 inches above the foliage. The flowers are interesting but not especially showy; the evergreen leaves are the real attraction.

American alumroot is easy to cultivate and can be grown in average to moderately dry soils if well established. It is doubly useful because it retains its foliage through the winter months, adding interest to the garden every day of the year. It is a great companion to many other shade-loving wildflowers, including foamflower, creeping phlox, native sedges and maidenhair fern.

Bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*)

Few native perennials are so valuable in the shady garden as bleeding heart. The delicate foliage, which grows up to 15 inches tall,

is a perfect foil for the heart-shaped pink flowers that hang in gracefully arching sprays. Unlike many other wildflowers with pronounced blooming periods (usually for 10 to 14 days), bleeding heart begins blooming in the spring and produces a succession of flowers that last the entire growing season. Long-lasting and beautiful as these delicate flowers are, it is the graceful blue-green ferny foliage that is the most valuable asset of this all-star native. If happily sited, bleeding heart will continue to produce the delicate-looking but durable foliage that is so important to any shade gardener.

Eastern columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)

One of the most widely recognized of our native wildflowers, eastern columbine is also one of the most beautiful. Its ease of growth also makes it one of the best of our native wildflowers for shady to partly sunny gardens. The delicate, nodding flowers of pastel red and yellow resemble an elaborate crown. Eastern columbine is a spring bloomer that happily reseeds but is never weedy. It is tolerant of a wide range of cultural conditions and combines well with many other shade-loving plants, especially ferns.

Southern shield fern (*Thelypteris kunthii*)

Although southern shield fern has been part of our native vegetation since pre-Columbian times, it is just beginning to gain popularity beyond a small group of knowledgeable plant enthusiasts, and rightly so. For a fern, it is amazingly durable and attractive, two attributes that would endear it to any gardener. Southern shield fern can even take full sun in sites where the soil is rich and not excessively dry, but like most other eastern ferns, it really prefers some shade. It spreads by short underground rhizomes, which can slowly increase to make thick clumps. Arching stems up to 4 feet tall and a foot wide at the base create a lush thicket of lime-green fronds. A deciduous species, southern shield fern can turn a surprising purplish bronze in November once the evening temperatures start to hover at or just below freezing. After a few killing frosts the fronds turn a not-unpleasant tawny color and become somewhat arched but stay basically upright throughout the winter months, maintaining their place and their interest all year long. Trim back these old fronds in the spring before new growth begins.

This fern is a pest-free, undemanding plant suited for Piedmont and Coastal Plain gardens and protected microhabitats in more westerly counties of North Carolina.

Native Sedges for Shade

In the shade garden, native sedges are foliage plants of great value because of their notable textural qualities which contribute to the shade garden year-round. They can be bold or delicate, evergreen or deciduous, depending on the species you select. Certainly not the first plants that come to mind when planning a native shade garden, sedges can, nonetheless, contribute greatly to the overall effect of a small garden and even give a certain degree of refinement, for which they are seldom credited. They are the green punctuation marks in the garden and serve as companions and connectors to more traditional shade-loving wildflowers. They can look great on their own or when grown beside or among rocks.

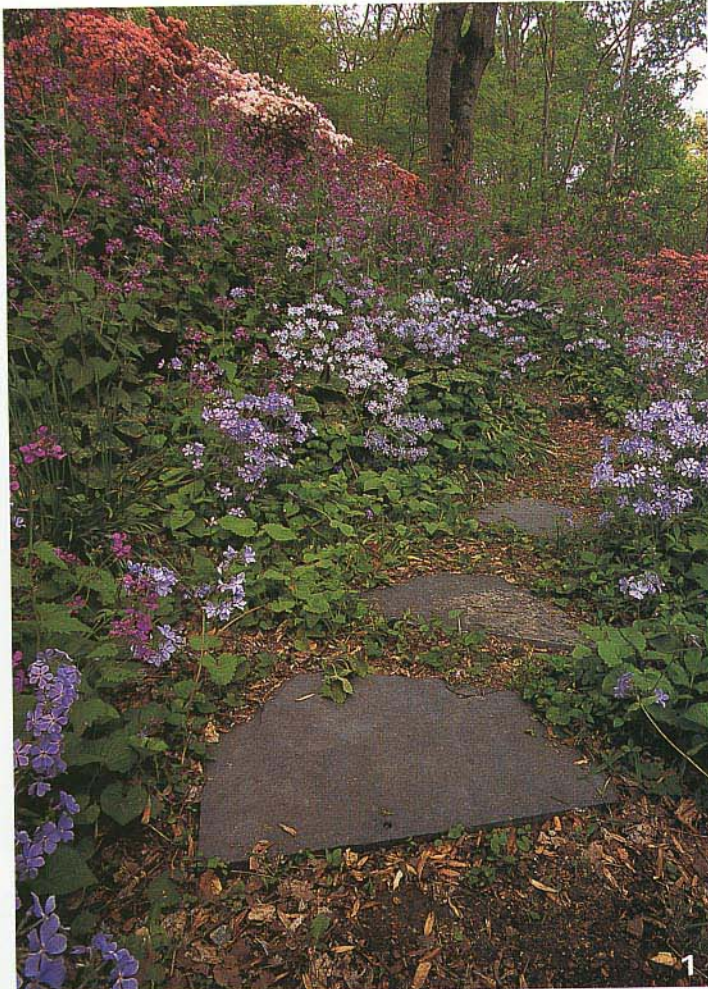
1-Gray's sedge
2-Woodland sedge



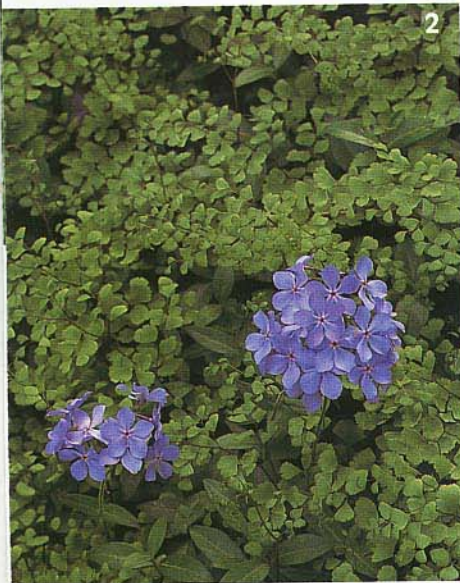
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA MCGAW



1-Woodland phlox
2-Woodland phlox and
Southern maidenhair fern
3-Green and gold

Here are three of the best.

Gray's sedge (*Carex grayi*) is a deciduous sedge that grows 2 feet tall with lettuce green grass-like leaves 1/2 inch wide. It is most interesting when it is in fruit. Gray's sedge produces long-lasting starlike inflated seed pods that are very showy. They rise above the foliage and persist, eventually turning an attractive buckskin color which is beautiful in the garden and a great addition to flower arrangements.

Plantain leaf sedge (*Carex plantaginea*) has bold evergreen leaves that grow 8 to 10 inches tall and 1 inch wide. The leaves have very pronounced, raised parallel veins that give them a distinctive

Other Shade-Loving Native Perennials

- Creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera* "Bruce's White," "Sherwood Purple" and "Home Fires")
- Deciduous wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
- Eastern blue phlox (*Phlox divaricata*)
- Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)
- Great blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*)
- Green dragon (*Arisaema dracontium*)
- Green and gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)
- Indian Pink (*Spigelia marilandica*)
- Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)
- Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium reptans*)
- Little heartleaf (*Hexastylis minor*)
- Northern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*)
- Solomon's plume (*Mianthemum racemosum*)
- Southern lady fern (*Athyrium asplenoides*)
- Southern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*)
- White wood aster (*Aster divaricata*)
- Woodland stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*)

Native trees and shrubs for shade

- Oak-leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*)
- Florida anise tree (*Illicium floridanum*)
- Florida hobble-bush (*Agarista populifolia*, formerly called *Leucothoe populifolia*)
- Silver leaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea radiata*)

Deciduous azaleas

- Smooth azalea (*Rhododendron arborescens*)
- Dwarf azalea (*R. atlanticum*)
- Florida flame azalea (*R. austrinum*)
- Flame azalea (*R. calendulaceum*)
- Piedmont azalea (*R. canescens*)
- Pinxter flower (*R. periclymenoides*)
- Plum-leaf azalea (*R. prunifolium*)
- Smooth azalea (*R. viscosum*)

corrugated look. It is native to our Mountains but is perfectly happy growing in most areas of the state provided that it is planted in a relatively shady site that is not too dry. Plantain-leaf sedge is one of our most distinctive and desirable native sedges.

Woodland sedge (*Carex flaccosperma*) is another very attractive native sedge with relatively wide evergreen leaves. This southeastern native is especially valuable because its leaves have a very beautiful bluish green cast to them, making it unique among the commercially available native sedges.

Sedges look great on their own or combined with other natives like American alumroot, green and gold, creeping phlox and small- to medium-sized ferns like northern or southern maidenhair fern.

Native Perennials for Sunny Sites

WHETHER YOUR IDEA OF SUNNY PERENNIAL GARDENING INVOLVES a very small planting along the sidewalk or a full-blown perennial bed that blooms from spring to fall, native plants fit the bill.

The basis of wildflower gardening in sunny situations is the same in any case: six to eight hours of direct sunlight, soil that is enriched with organic material, and adequate moisture during dry periods.

Morning and early-afternoon sunlight are best for native perennials. Sun-loving plants that don't get sufficient light tend to be uncharacteristically lanky. As they stretch for the light, they are much more likely to flop in the wind and rain. It is often useful in the central and eastern part of the state to provide some afternoon shade during the height of the summer to prevent overexposure. Remember that plants are very strongly oriented toward the light, and their flowers almost always face the sun. Place your native perennial bed where the flowers will be facing the direction from which they will be viewed most often.

To grow healthy wildflowers, you must provide healthy soil. Wildflowers are like any other plant—the more favorable the conditions you provide for them, the more productive and beautiful they will be. If there is a single “secret” to growing wildflowers successfully, it is the soil. When starting a new sunny wildflower bed, it is important to add organic material in the form of rotten leaves, compost, topsoil or other amendments that are rich in organic material. Work this material into the soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches before you plant. This kind of organic material increases soil fertility and attracts a multitude of beneficial soil organisms. It also acts like a sponge to retain moisture and make it available to the roots of your plants during dry periods. If you have an established perennial bed, add a 2- to 3-inch layer of compost or decomposed leaves to the top of your perennial bed in the late fall when you tidy things up in preparation for the winter dormant months. Wildflowers—indeed, all perennials—benefit in a host of ways from regular additions of some kind of composted organic material.

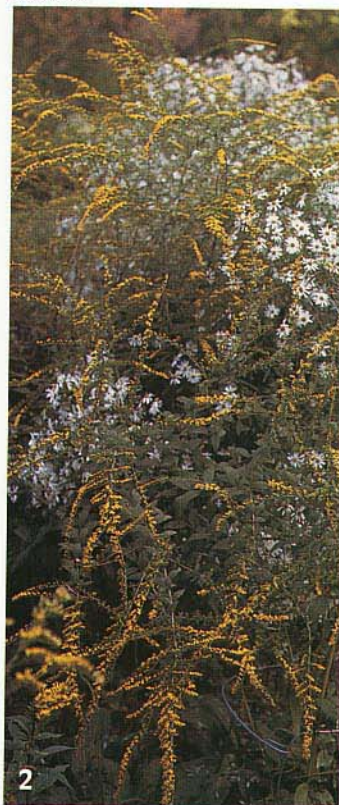
One other important thing to bear in mind is that, for the vast majority of our state, planting your wildflowers in the fall is essential to getting them well established and ready for the rigors of the growing season. This is especially true for wildflowers that are touted as drought tolerant. Roots of fall-planted wildflowers continue to grow as long as the soil temperature is in the 50-degree range, often long after the air temperature has dropped below that temperature. When spring

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- 1-Seashore mallow
- 2-Rough leaf goldenrod
- 3-Southern sundrops
- 4-Blue wild indigo

arrives, roots and plants are well established and ready for the hot and often dry summer months.

Here is a sampling of some of the many garden-worthy, sun-loving native wildflowers.

Seashore mallow (*Kosteletskya virginica*)

Seashore mallow is a rarely grown but stunningly beautiful late-summer bloomer. It can grow 5 to 8 feet tall and bears beautiful 3-inch flowers at the upper portion of the many-branched plant. The five-petaled, bright pink blooms with a central column of yellow stamens offer a refreshing change from the flurry of yellow-flowered plants that bloom in the fall.

Often found growing in brackish marshes in the eastern part of our state, seashore mallow is equally at home in gardens throughout North Carolina, including the Southern Appalachians.

Anyone who has seen this native perennial growing in its natural haunts can testify to its graceful pyramidal habit and extravagant floral beauty (a mature plant can produce hundreds of flowers in a single season!). Why it has not received the horticultural attention that it so richly deserves is a mystery.

Other great wildflowers in the mallow family include halberd-leaved marsh mallow (*Hibiscus militaris*), red hibiscus (*Hibiscus coccineus*) and crimson-eyed marsh mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*).



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1-Butterfly milkweed
2-Carolina bush pea

Southern sundrops (*Oenothera fruticosa*)

Few perennials are easier to grow and more beautiful than the southern sundrop. It is frequently encountered blooming in late spring on road margins, clearings at edges of woods throughout North Carolina. This carefree native wildflower bears lovely four-petaled blooms. The cup-shaped flowers are a beautiful clear yellow color that complements many other wildflowers. They are clustered at the top of the stems, which grow 1 to 2 feet tall. A distinctive purple red mottling occurs on the stem leaves as well as the evergreen basal leaves. About the only thing that this otherwise agreeable wildflower dislikes is to be planted in soil that is too rich or overfertilized. Southern sundrops are easily propagated either by seed or by division in late fall or early spring.

Blue wild indigo (*Baptisia australis*)

Beautiful flowers, attractive foliage and longevity all recommend this very desirable North Carolina native wildflower. Spikes of bluish purple flowers rise above the foliage and bloom in mid- to late May. Pealike flowers attract the attention of our native bumblebees, which are the primary pollinators of these beautiful blooms. The durable and attractive trifoliolate leaves have a definite blue green color. Not only do they make a perfect background for the flowers, but they also give the plant a dense, rounded shape that is very attractive the entire growing season. One of the longest lived of all perennials, blue wild indigo is also one of the easiest to grow. All that it asks is to be planted in a sunny site and be given a year or two to settle in before it returns the favor with beautiful flowers and attractive foliage.

Other garden-worthy Baptisias include white wild indigo (*Baptisia alba*), yellow wild indigo (*Baptisia spherocarpa*), and the beautiful hybrid, *Baptisia* x "Purple Smoke" (a Botanical Garden introduction).



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Rough leaf goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*) "Fireworks"

This stunning fall-blooming perennial was selected and named at the North Carolina Botanical Garden. Refreshingly graceful for a goldenrod, "Fireworks" forms delicate arching sprays of flowers interwoven into a netted yellow dome when it reaches maturity. The general form of this outstanding named variety of goldenrod is reminiscent of the golden spidery arms radiating from exploding aerial fireworks, expressed in delicate flowers rather than sparks. "Fireworks" forms a tight, spreading clump of evergreen foliage that can grow 3 or 4 feet tall. It is one of the most deservedly popular new native selected perennials on the market today. Easy to grow, graceful and very durable, "Fireworks" deserves a place in every sunny fall border.

Other Native Perennials for Sunny Sites

- Appalachian smooth phlox (*Phlox glaberrima* ssp. *Trifolia*)
- Aromatic aster (*Aster oblongifolius*)
- Bear grass (*Yucca filamentosa*)
- Beard tongue (*Penstemon digitalis* "Husker Red")
- Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*)
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida* "Goldstrum")
- Blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)
- Boltonia (*Boltonia asteroides* "Snowbank")
- Climbing aster (*Aster carolinianus*)
- Lance-leaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*)
- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*)
- Stoke's aster (*Stokesia laevis* "Omega Skyrocket")
- Summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata* "David" and "Robert Poore")
- Swamp Sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*)
- Thread-leaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis verticillata* "Zagreb")

Native Grasses for Sunny Sites

- Bushy bluestem (*Andropogon glomeratus*)
- Hairgrass (*Muhlybergia capillaris*)
- Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* "The Blues")
- Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* "Dallas Blues," "Heavy Metal")

Native Trees and Shrubs for Sunny Sites

- American snowbell (*Styrax americanus*)
- Carolina allspice or sweet shrub (*Calycanthus floridus* "Athens")
- Carolina silverbell (*Halesia carolina*)
- Fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*)
- Highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*)
- Red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*)
- Swamp haw (*Vaccinium nudum*)
- Sweet pepperbush (*Clethra acuminata* "Hummingbird" and "Ruby Spice")
- Sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)
- Witch alder (*Fothergilla major*)
- Yellowwood (*Cladrastis lutea*)

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1-Hairgrass
2-Pink flowering dogwood



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Selected Sources of Native Plants

Lamtree Farm

2323 Copeland Road
Warrensville, N.C. 28693
Catalog \$2
(woody natives)

Native Gardens

5737 Fisher Lane
Greenback, TN 37742
(423) 856-0220
Catalog \$2
(native wildflowers
and seeds)

Niche Gardens

1111 Dawson Road
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27516
(919) 967-0078
www.nichegdn.com
Catalog \$3
(native wildflowers)

Plant Delights Nursery

9241 Sauls Road
Raleigh, N.C. 27603
(919) 772-4794
www.plantdel.com
Catalog \$3
(native wildflowers)

Sunlight Gardens

174 Golden Lane
Andersonville, TN 37705
(800) 272-7396
Free catalog
(native wildflowers)

Take-Root Nursery

220 Blakes Dr.
Pittsboro, N.C. 27312
(919) 967-9515
rboyles@interpath.net
(ferns)

We-Du Nurseries

Route 5, Box 724
Marion, N.C. 28752
(828) 738-8300
www.we-du.com
Catalog \$2
(native wildflowers, ferns,
sedges and woody plants)

Woodlanders

1128 Colleton Ave.
Aiken, S.C. 29801
(803) 648-7522
(native wildflowers, ferns and
woody plants)

Other recommended goldenrods include Roan Mountain goldenrod (*Solidago roanensis*), seashore goldenrod (*Solidago sempervirens*), blue-stem goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*), and sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*).

Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

Clusters of bright orange flowers bloom on butterfly milkweed in the early summer. This very durable wildflower also attracts monarch butterflies which sip nectar and lay their eggs on the foliage.

Butterfly milkweed is 8 to 12 inches tall and usually has dark green lance-shaped leaves that exude a sticky, milky sap when damaged.

Thick, fleshy roots enable butterfly milkweed to survive dry conditions in the wild, but it is equally at home in the wildflower border. Fleshy roots are an excellent survival strategy for dry sites, but they also make this native wildflower difficult to transplant once established in the garden. It prefers to stay put once planted.

The front of the wildflower border is the best place for this tough and beautiful native. It looks best when grown in combination with thread-leaf coreopsis, Southern sundrops, purple coneflower and lance-leaf coreopsis.

Butterfly milkweed is usually late to start growing in the spring and it is a good idea to mark its location with a stone so as to prevent accidentally digging it up or trying to plant something on top of it.

Where to Buy Native Plants

It is very important to purchase native plants from reputable dealers. Always buy from nurseries that offer propagated native plants; never buy plants that have been collected from the wild. Purchasing wild-collected native plants is bad for the consumer (plants receive rough handling and have almost always been damaged) and for the natural areas from which these plants have been dug. If in doubt about the source of native plants, ask the vendor and let him know that, as a consumer, you do not support collection of native plants from the wild. Be especially wary of trilliums and native orchids that are inexpensively priced; this usually means that they were collected from wild areas. These two groups in particular are difficult to propagate and slow growing. Nursery-grown, ethically propagated plants of these groups are priced accordingly. ☒

Rob Gardner is a curator with the North Carolina Botanical Garden in Chapel Hill.



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1-Red hibiscus
2-Red buckeye

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