

We are sold on *native plants* – but now what?

Large-flower white
trillium (*Trillium
grandiflorum*) JANE ROGERS

By Jill Sell
Akron Beacon Journal

Choosing native plants for your garden is “no longer a trend, but a movement,” said Jennifer Johnson, vice president of Native Roots Inc., and co-owner of nurseries in the Village of Richfield and Mineral Wells, West Virginia.

Gardeners select native wildflowers, grasses, shrubs and trees for many reasons, with most people realizing the ecological benefits, according to Johnson. One favorite reason is that planting certain natives attract wildlife, including birds and beneficial insects (think bees and butterflies) that are important pollinators. Native gardens can help reduce soil erosion and require less water, as well as little or no fertilizer and insecticide. Natives also can be an answer to heavily shaded areas or wet or dry areas. And they can be lower maintenance and attractive – if done well.

“We certainly don’t want to discourage people from growing native plants,” said Johnson, who is pursuing a Master of Science in Environmental Science from Marshall University. “But they aren’t just low maintenance by nature. There has to be some element of design and selection involved for your particular

space. And if you want more of a tidy look instead of cottage garden look, there are ways to go about it.”

Sonia Bingham, Johnson’s sister and president of Native Roots, believes webinars and other digital methods of dispensing information exposed more people to the beauty and benefit of native plants.

“The movement took a strong hold. We have seen a substantial change in the past two or three years,” said Bingham, who along with Johnson, has participated in farmers markets, park events and other educational activities to promote natives.

Ok, so many of us agree we should plant native wildflowers in our gardens. (Don’t worry, no one should criticize if you don’t give up your roses. Life is adjustment.) But what do we do with the natives to make sure they thrive? Johnson and Bingham (a wetland biologist with degrees from Hiram College and The Ohio State University), are here to help and are now doing more than growing and selling native plants.

“We are expanding our services,” said Johnson. “There just aren’t enough people who know what to do with the plants. We are growing to meet the increased plant demand and providing services to help people get things done.”

Services include native plant consultations, ecological restorations, invasive species management, bed installations, soil health management and mowing reduction plans, as well as mulch, compost and nutrient applications.

A fee is charged for lengthy or complex consultations, but the sisters will answer brief questions that are emailed or texted at no charge when they have time. (Also check out Native Roots’ very helpful website at www.nativerootsinc.com, where your question may be answered.)

A Native Roots Nursery Open House is Tuesday, May 30, at the Richfield location. Johnson suggests interested customers can review the inventory of plants beforehand (about 100 species are available) and ask questions through the website before attending the open house, which can be very busy. Here are a few general tips from Johnson:

- “You may have a 20-foot-by- 20-foot bed that has 30 species in it, one of each. But we don’t really recommend that. We recommend planting in clusters or large patches of one species for impact and compatibility.”

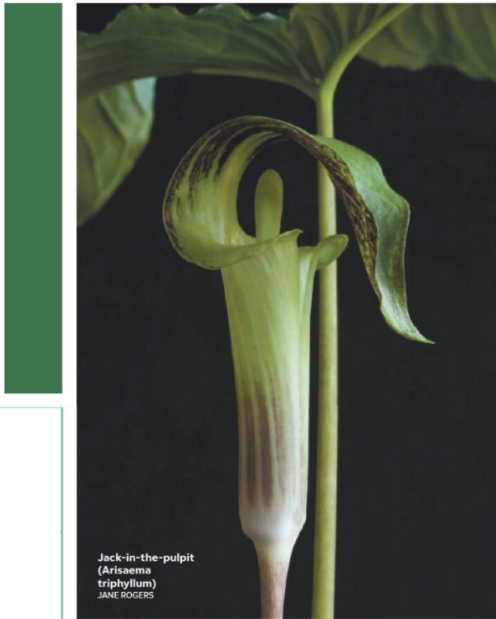
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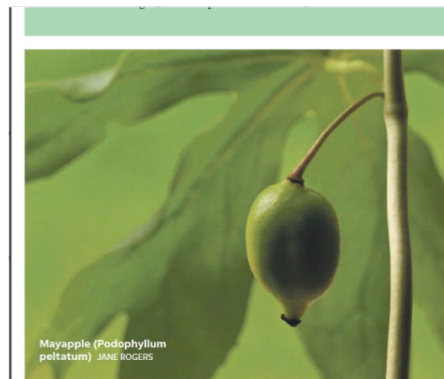
- "If you want to grow a plant that likes moisture but you have a site that is not wet, you still can do it. But you need a good compost and to water it well the first year or until it is established."
- Johnson believes some people shy away from many native wildflowers because they are taller than non-natives or their cultivators. Some grow to five feet tall. "My husband does not want tall shrubs in our flowerbeds, close to the house. So I can't plant shrubs unless I put them in front of my beds. But I can grow beautiful, tall native wildflowers there," she said.
- "Using soil amendments with native plants is not all that important, but you need a good mulch."
- "Above all, go with your heart and the plants you love."

With the boom in native plant interest, the number of growers across the country who sell online and in nurseries has also greatly increased. But unfortunately, not all businesses sell plants that are real natives, or they sell plants that may be native to California, but not Ohio.

Johnson and Bingham are hoping to create standards for growers to ensure the integrity of native plants and protect consumers. This year the women are working to establish the Ohio Native Plant Guild, a group of growers, vendors and other interested parties. They hope to have information to the public about the organization and its criteria in 2024. Growers, landscapers and others are welcome to contact Native Roots for more information.



Jack-in-the-pulpit
(*Arisaema triphyllum*)
JANE ROGERS



Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*)
JANE ROGERS

Favorite native plants

How do you choose a favorite wildflower? For native plant lovers, that is an impossible question to answer. But here are six well-loved selections made by President Sonia Bingham and Vice President Jennifer Johnson of Native Roots, Inc. You might want to try growing them in your garden.

Whorled Rosinweed (*Silphium trifoliatum*) is a perennial that can grow up to about 4 ½ feet tall. Its yellow sunflower-like blooms appear in July, August and September and are favorites of native bees.

Cup Plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) can reach 10 feet high and blooms from July to September. It can form colonies, so make sure you control it or plant it where it can spread. Yellow flowers attract red aphids, but there is no need for insecticides. Hungry predatory insects will take care of the tiny bugs, which are also food for hummingbird chicks.

Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) provides purple (and less commonly, white) blooms from May to September. You have seen this perennial in fields and roadsides.

Scarlet Bergamot (*Monarda didyma*) is also known as Scarlet Beebalm or Oswego Tea. (The Oswego Native Americans taught white settlers to make a tea from the plant's leaves.) Gorgeous red flowers bloom late June to late August. This native likes moist soil and is a top nectar plant for butterflies.

Dense Blazing Star (*Liatris spicata*) is a spike-like plant that grows from 2 to 6 feet. Purple flowerheads resemble feathers, and birds, butterflies and hummingbirds will be grateful if you plant this perennial.

Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) is a plant many gardeners recognize with its purple flower rays and a spiny brown center. It is easy to grow, often blooms to September and likes dry soil. The herbal tea made from the flowers is said to have many health benefits.