Native or adapted plants: does it matter?

Before we fill our landscapes with 'native' plants at the expense of imported species, we should ask ourselves one question: Which is more important, the origin of the plant or its characteristics?

by H. S. STEVENS

Choose flowers by shape, shade or sun tolerance, hardiness, disease/insect resistance, and moisture and pH requirements.

With the increased emphasis on water conservation and reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides during the past few years, the popularity of native plants has grown by leaps and bounds, and rightly so.

Properly selected, native plants are attractive, require little maintenance, and are long lived. Native plant societies have a lofty and worthwhile goal: to preserve and protect the plant species and habitats that add natural color and beauty to our environment. Individuals who choose to grow only native plants are also to be commended. They are preserving species and helping the environment. Nevertheless, the idea that native plants are necessarily tougher, better adapted, and more resistant to insects and diseases than other plants is only partially true. It's certainly correct that plants native to a particular area are adapted to local soils and growing conditions.

▶ For example, plants that are native to acid, sandy soils are not going to grow satisfactorily in alkaline, clay soil.

▶ Plants that are native to frost-free coastal areas are not going to withstand northern winters.

▶ And plants that are native to dry, arid regions are not going to thrive in low areas or those with exceptionally high rainfall. These are the reasons that native plant societies and the National Wildflower Research Center recommend specific varieties for specific areas. But, does this mean that natives are the only plants that will thrive in each part of the country? Of course not. Hundreds of introduced species are just as adaptable, just as care-free, and, in some cases, much more attractive.

In my own yard and garden, I have Japanese cucumbers, South African Cape Honeysuckle, Chinese juniper, New Guinea impatiens, African marigold, Asian hyacinth bean, California poppies, English daisies, Persian ivy and European lettuce, along with violets my wife, Lorna, dug on Long Island, and daisies and hostas from her brother's home in Iowa. All have thrived in our Texas landscape.

Chinese pistache, Russian sage, Dutch tulips and hyacinths, Japanese honeysuckle and Iceland poppies also do well here. Our native plants, such as coral honeysuckle, Texas sage and purple coneflowers, have fared no better.

The many species of low-care plants that have been introduced from other areas or other countries that are on display at arboreta and botanical gardens throughout the nation are evidence enough that native plants are not the only ones that can thrive with minimum use of water, fertilizer and pesticides.

If you or a client want to "go native," by all means do just that. It is a philosophy above reproach. On the other hand, if a plant's appearance and ease of maintenance are the main objectives, forget geographical boundaries. The most important considerations are size, shape, shade or sun tolerance, hardiness, disease and insect resistance, and moisture and pH requirements. These are the qualities that make the plant adapted to your particular growing conditions, and they are available in introduced and adapted species just as they are in natives. **LM**