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Wildflowers and Native Plants: Are They the Same?

Nancy McDonald



Fletcher Wildlife Garden
Gillian Boyd

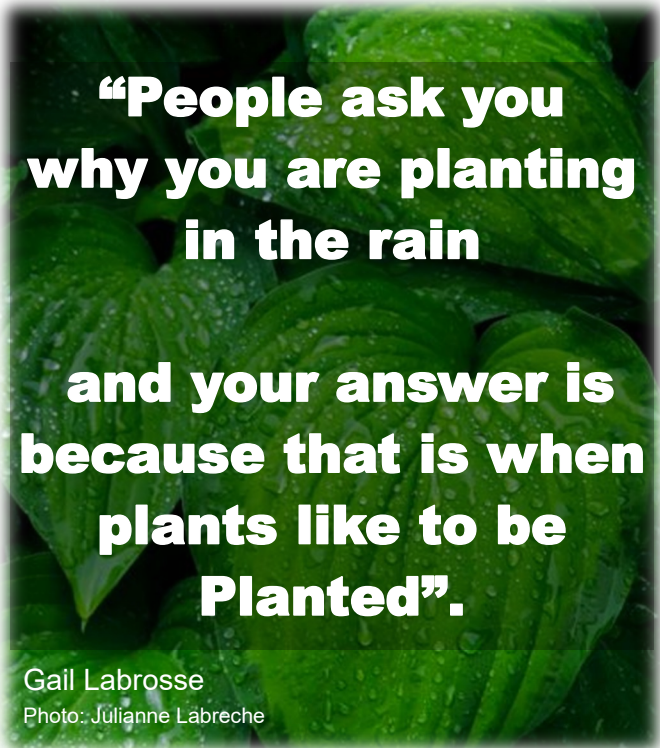
It's not only new gardeners who assume that wildflowers and native plants are the same. And that when we purchase a wildflower packet of seeds to plant, it will mean many years of bloom with very little gardening maintenance. We may be envisioning a meadow landscape filled with wildflowers

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growing freely and visited by native bees, pollinators, and beneficial insects. A true meadow ecosystem will provide habitat for other living creatures too, such as birds, bats, small mammals, snakes, toads and frogs.



Native Plants

Nancy McDonald

Often the terms native plants and wildflowers are used interchangeably, as though they are one and the same. But should they be? The City of Ottawa's website states "*Native plants are adapted to local climate, soil conditions and diseases.*" The website goes on to say "*Make sure the plants you choose are actually native to eastern Ontario, not just to North America in general.*" A native plant is one that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat prior to European contact.

To add to the confusion, some wildflowers are indeed native plants, but others have been introduced either intentionally or as garden escapes. Essentially a wildflower, according to Cambridge dictionary,

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

When should I start spring lawn tasks like repairing turf and fertilizing?

It's hard to give an exact date, since weather varies. Generally, you want to stay off the lawn as much as possible until the frost is out of the ground and while the texture of the ground is soft and muddy. Otherwise, this can lead to compaction. It is also easier to accidentally damage spots where the grass is thinner when the ground is soft. Wait until the ground is firm.

One possible exception with respect to lawn repair is torn or disturbed sod. This can happen if a snowplow went a little off course over the winter, for example. If the pieces of sod can be saved and replaced, put them back, stamping them down a bit so they make good contact. Do this as early as you can move them so they don't dry out.

Raking off debris and overseeding can be done fairly soon after the soil is firmed up enough to walk on it. Fertilizing can wait a bit longer, until the grass has started growing nicely. Regular fertilizers will not affect grass seed germination. However, be aware that if your fertilizer is corn gluten, (sold as a combination fertilizer and weed germination suppressant), then the weed-suppressing effects could also keep your grass seed from germinating. There are mixed opinions on how long you should wait to overseed your lawn after applying corn gluten. Tests show its effects can last for up to six weeks, but if conditions are less than ideal, it may not have any noticeable effect on seed germination, whether grass or weeds.

Corn gluten's weed control ability requires fairly specific conditions to be effective. It should be applied before weeds like crabgrass germinate, which happens when the soil temperature is around 15°C. If it is not applied heavily enough, or if the weather is wet, it won't be very effective at preventing seedling growth.

is:

“any flower that grows without being planted by people.”

Introduced species have the potential to displace native species in the wild. Queen Anne’s Lace and dandelions are two introduced species that came with settlers and have spread readily. Wildflowers, either native or non-native, can establish and reproduce without our assistance. Hence, the idea of establishing a meadow garden seems to imply less work at first glance.



Native Plants

Nancy McDonald

So, what about those prettily packaged wildflower mixes available everywhere? I purchased two such packets from well-known seed companies to do an analysis. One was described as a perennial mix and the other as an annual all-purpose mix. In the perennial mix, I found seeds such as baby’s breath, calendula, California poppy, alyssum, wallflower, and lupin. The percentage of the mix for each seed ranged from one to sixteen percent, with the highest percentage of seeds belonging to the baby’s breath. Gardeners in British Columbia are warned each Valentine’s day not to put baby’s breath, often included with rose bouquets, in their compost as it is invasive in that province. The perennial packet



I overwintered some dahlia tubers and would like to start them indoors for earlier blooms. One of the tubers is wrinkled rather than firm like the others. Is there a chance it will grow? Should I soak it in water before planting? Can I divide the tubers now to get more plants?

Whether a wrinkled tuber will grow or not depends on the extent of the dryness. If it is too shrivelled, soaking in water probably won’t help. You could cut a little bit off the bottom end of the tuber to see if the inside is still fleshy or if it’s completely dried out and brown. If it’s still fleshy, go ahead and plant it.

As far as dividing goes, I’m not sure whether you’re talking about dividing a clump of tubers (from one plant last year), or an individual tuber from a clump. If you have a clump, yes, you can absolutely divide them now before planting. Make sure to get an eye (from the stem end) on each division. A website that explains it all with useful pictures is <https://summerdreamsfarm.com/dahlia-tuber-and-splitting-guide>.

If you only have a single tuber that you’d like to propagate, you can make more by taking stem cuttings. Pot up your tuber, and wait until it starts to produce shoots. When a shoot gets to eight to ten centimetres high and with a few nodes, you can cut it off with a clean, sharp knife. Take care not to damage the tuber in the process. Remove the bottom leaves, dip the stem end in rooting hormone, and plant it almost as deep as the remaining leaves. 🌱

suggests most varieties will bloom the second year. Without the botanical name on the packet, there is no assurance that the perennials included are native. The annuals in the packet, which may reseed, are certainly not native.

The second packet of annual all-purpose mix does not give a percentage of seeds included but does give the botanical name rather than the common name. This packet states there should be bloom from June until frost. Some of the seeds included

such as *Lupinus perennis* are perennial. As well as baby's breath (*Gypsophila*), this mix also contains *Centaurea cyanus* (bachelor's button), an aggressive spreader, and a non-native species now considered a weed in Ontario. The problem is *Centaurea* seeds are common in many wildflower mixes. So really, it is buyer "be aware" with these mixes.

We must ask if packaging a mixture of annual, biannual and perennial seeds together makes good gardening sense? Do all these seeds enjoy the same growing conditions and planting specifications? Very unlikely.



Wildflowers in a Ditch

Gillian Boyd

What is the well-intentioned gardener to do? Luckily, we are learning more about what we should plant in our Ottawa gardens. The advantages to using native plants include:

- They are adapted to our cold winter temperatures, summer heat and periods of drought.
- Once established, they require watering only in extreme periods of drought and do not require fertilization.
- They resist or are tolerant to pests and diseases.
- They provide a habitat with foods suitable for native pollinators.

[VASCAN](#) is the go-to database for reliable information on the vascular plants of Canada. You can

type in a plant you are researching. As an example, I typed in one that many of us grow in our gardens, *Aquilegia canadensis*. [Aquilegia canadensis - Database of Vascular Plants of Canada \(VASCAN\) \(canadensys.net\)](#) and quickly saw on the map where this plant was native.

We are fortunate in Ottawa to have a resource such as the Ottawa Wildflower Seed Library which is a local grassroots organization. I encourage you to visit their website [Ottawa Wildflower Seed Library](#) and take advantage of their native seed giveaways which occur throughout the city. This organization provides seeds for plants native to our area. They also have excellent information and a list of resources on their website.

As demand grows, more native plant websites and growers, along with garden centres, are offering native plants. This is where research helps to ensure you are purchasing the true species rather than a cultivar or hybrid. Always look for the botanical name and information on whether the seeds were collected locally or in the wild. If the seeds were mass-collected, they may not have been sorted and likely will contain weed seeds. I have been pleased to recently see some native seed companies producing seed packets with fewer seeds which are well suited to the home gardener.

Our local public library has a copy of Lorraine Johnson and Sheila Colla's 2022 book **A Garden for the Rusty-Patched Bumblebee**. It is a wonderful resource and I keep it close by when I am considering adding new plants to my garden. Douglas Tallamy's 2020 book **Nature's Best Hope** gives encouragement for what I can do to preserve biodiversity in my gardens. Climate change and other frightening environmental challenges often seem beyond our control, but I hope that what I decide to grow in my garden can have an impact.

As I get ready for the gardening season, I ask myself: "How can I improve my suburban ecosystem this year and create a beneficial habitat for our native pollinators and wildlife?" Planting native plants comes back as part of the perfect answer. 🌱

Keystone plants: Shrubs - Ecoregion 5

Penka Matanska

“Restoring viable habitat within the human-dominated landscapes that separate habitat fragments - with as much of this land as possible - is the single most effective thing we can do to stop the steady drain of species from our local ecosystems.”

Douglas W. Tallamy

For a long time, paved spaces and vast fields of grass have replaced the native plants that insects and animals typically used as host plants or as food sources. Pollination is an essential process in a plant’s life cycle, so introducing plants for bees, butterflies and moths in our gardens will help reverse the sharp decline in native pollinator populations. In his book **Bringing Nature Home**, Douglas Tallamy emphasizes our chance to restore the biodiversity balance that has been eliminated in our suburban living spaces. Native plants are well suited to a particular ecosystem region since they have evolved to thrive there. As a result, they are far less difficult to grow.

As mentioned in the February 2023 Trowel Talk issue, the Ottawa region falls into the [Northern Forest - Ecoregion 5](#). This article, part 3 in a series on native keystone plants, will identify three keystone shrubs for Ecoregion 5. Some of these plants are relatively small and can be easily grown in the limited space of city gardens. They will also help us see more bees and birds in our backyards.

Keystone plant species are native plants that have maximum benefits to support life by supplying large amounts of food and shelter. They support the specific wildlife that lives in a particular area. These often ignored species are the backbone of local ecosystems. They are better adapted to the climate and soil conditions of the area and are naturally more resistant to pests. These plants require less maintenance and less additional watering. They support caterpillars, bees, birds, insects and other wildlife with nesting places and food, whereas other

introduced plants fail to do so.

Vaccinium - is a common and widespread genus of shrubs or dwarf shrubs in the heath family. The fruits of many species are eaten by humans. Many are the host for 276 caterpillar species, and 6 bee species rely on these plants for food.



Lowbush blueberry leaves in fall

Penka Matanska

Note: The map [Ecoregions of North America – level I](#), was used to determine the ecoregion for the keystone plant articles. This is a large scale map and boundaries are not always clear or clean.

An example is the **low-bush blueberry** (*Vaccinium angustifolium*), a small shrub up to 0.5 m in height that is native to eastern Canada and the northeast United States. It forms dense colonies in the wild in both deciduous and evergreen forests. It prefers loose acidic soils, growing along sandy riverbanks or in meadows and mixed forests. In an urban setting, it can be planted in a sunny or semi-shade location where the soil can be amended with sand. Pinkish-white, bell-shaped flowers clustered along its stems appear in early spring. The fruits are small purple berries that are very sweet and are favored by many birds including robins, eastern bluebirds, tanagers, and mammals such as red squirrels and chipmunks. The foliage and flowers are also grazed by some animals. Pollination by insects is essential for fruit development. Bees collect nectar and bumble bees collect pollen from the plants. The low-bush blueberry can be propagated using cuttings and transplanted rhizomes. In fall, the leaves turn bright red and create a focal point in the garden in later months of the year, making the low-bush blueberry a good candidate to grow in your backyard.

Large cranberry (*Viburnum macrocarpon*) is a small shrub that reaches only about 15 cm in height. It brings flowers, fruit and fall colour to the garden, as well as a food source and hiding space for smaller insects, caterpillars, and birds. It grows well in full sun or partial shade and in moist well-drained acidic soil. Cranberry shrubs can do well layered in the city garden under bigger bushes or trees, if exposed to some sunlight. They spread via rhizomes, forming low ground mats when located in cool moist soil, usually under a tree close to water or in bog areas. The flowers are white to pinkish with a lily shape growing on long stalks. The red, round fruits ripening in late fall persist through winter and are loved by birds and squirrels. The leaves turn purple toned bronze in fall.

Salix are native willow bushes that support 397 caterpillar species as a host plant and provide food for 12 bee species.



Large cranberry fruit

Penka Matanska

Male willow flowers

Penka Matanska

While **pussy willow** (*Salix discolor*) and **black willow** (*S. nigra*) are larger species suitable for spacious gardens near water, the **prairie willows** (*S. humilis*) are smaller leafy shrubs that can grow around 3 metres in height. The first two grow in wetlands and prefer moist soils, while the prairie willow prefers drier sandy or gravel soils, identifying it as the only willow that does not grow around water. This makes it very suitable for suburban areas. Planted in full sun to partial shade and trimmed to look aesthetically fitting in the space, the prairie willow not only adds interest, but it will provide food and shelter for wildlife and help the ecosystem balance in your garden. This plant has very distinct leaves with a woolly appearance underneath, which is one of its key characteristics.

Willows bloom in April-May, the bushes are covered in catkins before the leaves emerge. Since the

plants are dioecious, the male and female catkins are formed on different plants. Depending on which type you have, they are hairy round yellow for the male flowers, while the female flowers are slender and more gray-green. The flowers attract bees, and flies feed on the pollen. Other insects, like butterflies and caterpillars, feed on the foliage and stems. Birds use willow branches for nesting and catkins for food in early spring when other food sources are difficult to find.

Shrubs diversify the garden with extra depth in horizontal and vertical directions. When choosing bushes for your next garden project, consider the keystone species first. Looking to reintroduce these bushes in your garden will be your small contribution that will have the big impact of helping sustain our eco-diversity in residential areas. 🌱

Gardening for Birds: Planting for American Robins

Julianne Labreche



Robin with earthworms

Gary Thomas Hall

The American robin, with its brick-red breast, yellow beak and grey wings, is a much-loved harbinger of spring, and always a welcome visitor to Ottawa after our long, cold winters. Most sightings start just when the ice and snow are melting. These birds are well suited to city living, often found foraging for earthworms in the turf grass that grows so abundantly in North American suburbs.

In addition to earthworms, their diet consists of insects, fruits and berries. Although robins don't visit my birdfeeder, they are interested in many of the shrubs and trees around the yard. They are not fussy eaters and consume many different kinds of fruits and berries, both native and non-native, including blueberries, mulberries, grapes, juniper, holly and crabapple. Most robins migrate south but some remain throughout winter months here, even when food resources are scarce. Those remaining are sometimes seen in flocks, their range determined by local food supplies and the weather.

If you want to attract robins to your property and you have a lawn, water it in the early morning. This will bring earthworms to the surface, making it easier for robins to forage. Watering the lawn during the early morning hours is also good for your lawn, letting moisture absorb deep into the roots and minimizing evaporation before the day becomes hot.

These days, of course, gardeners are being encouraged to shrink the size of their lawns to plant native plants instead, explore alternative ground covers or overseed turf with clover.

Another way to attract robins is to provide a bird bath in your garden. A bird bath filled with clean water keeps them cool and removes oil and dust from their wings. My own bird baths, situated at varying heights around the garden, are refilled daily with fresh water and scrubbed clean with a stiff brush when needed. Robins make frequent trips to my bird baths to splash with apparent gusto and delight. In the winter months, a heated bird bath might attract robins as well as other over-wintering birds.



Robin in my birdbath

Julianne Labreche

To attract robins to your garden, grow these native plants:

Alternate-leaved or pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*) – This lovely large shrub or small tree, a

native to eastern North America, is hardy in Ottawa and will grow in full sun, or partial sun and shade. Although preferring moist, fertile, well-drained soil, it will grow in clay, loam, sand or coarse soil. The pagoda dogwood is a useful native tree because it attracts a range of insect pollinators in spring with its creamy-white flowers and produces late summer fruit popular with many bird species, including robins. The tree may also be used for nesting.



Dogwood berries

Julianne Labreche

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) – This deciduous shrub is dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are on separate plants. Both are needed for the female plant to produce vibrant red berries that can last through winter into spring. This slow-growing, medium sized-shrub grows best in moist to wet, well-drained conditions. It grows in clay, loam, sandy or organic soil.

Shadblow Serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*) – This small to medium-sized deciduous tree is native to eastern North America, extending to parts of Ontario. Multi-stemmed, it grows in full sun or in partial shade. In spring, its clusters of small, white flowers provide nectar for birds and its reddish-purple berry-like fruit offers food in summer. In fall, its leaves turn a vibrant shade of red. It is an ideal native tree, well suited to many suburban properties in Ottawa. Serviceberry fruit provides food for many songbirds. 🌿



Serviceberry
Julianne Labreche

Tip: Fill a suet feeder with nesting material for birds in spring. Include natural materials such as dried grass, twigs, moss, lichen, spider webs, animal fur and feathers. Refrain from using yarn or string that may tangle baby birds, or pet fur that may contain anti-flea and tick chemicals. Avoid dryer lint too that may contain harmful chemicals and synthetic fibres. By leaving your garden uncut in winter and early spring, you will provide lots of natural nesting materials for the birds.

In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt —Margaret Atwood, author

In the Alcove Garden: Anise hyssop

Amanda Carrigan



Anise hyssop
Amanda Carrigan

Botanical name: *Agastache foeniculum*.

Zones: 4-9

Growing conditions: Sun to part sun, moist to dry, well-drained soil.

Native range: Central to eastern North America

Although it may not originally be native to the Ottawa area, anise hyssop is a North American native plant that is well liked by pollinators, and appreciated for its ease of growth and attractive appearance. Anise hyssop grows up to 1 metre tall. When rubbed, the foliage smells strongly of licorice or anise, hence the common name.

Like other members of the mint family, it has square stems and opposite leaves. This herb has vertical clusters of tubular, lipped, light purple flowers on strong, branched stems. Unlike the foliage, the flowers are unscented.

Agastache comes from the Greek 'agan' (very much) and 'stachys' (ear of wheat), for the shape of the flower spikes. Foeniculum comes from the Latin for 'hay'.

Flowering time is approximately from June to September. The flowers provide nectar and pollen to a variety of bees, butterflies and insects, as well as hummingbirds. Over 30 species of bees and 12



Anise hyssop
Amanda Carrigan

butterfly and moth species have been documented visiting anise hyssop. It attracts skippers and fritillaries, bumblebees, leafcutter bees, resin bees, bee flies, and many other insects.

Anise hyssop is an easy plant to grow in most locations, requiring only well-drained soil and a minimum of four hours of sun per day, but thrives with six or more hours. It may get mildew or root rot in wet or humid locations, but is generally pest and disease free. Rabbits and deer don't usually eat it. Anise hyssop forms a clump and does not spread strongly by runners like many other mint family members. However, it will reseed itself easily. Deadhead plants after flowering if you want to minimize re-seeding and encourage more bloom.

The seed matures 3-4 weeks after flowering. If you want to collect seeds for later sowing, note that they need light to germinate, and a 30-day cold stratification period. Seedlings are easily identified in the garden by the licorice scent and usually a purple tinge to the leaves. New plants from seed will often bloom the first year.

The leaves of anise hyssop have an interesting combination of licorice, lemon, and mint flavours. They can be eaten or used in herbal teas or jellies. Historically, the leaf tea has been used in folk medicine for fever, coughs and colds, to induce sweating, and for a weak heart. 🌿



**Food for the caterpillar of
Mourning Cloak
(*Nymphalis antiopa*)**

- Willows—*Salix* spp.
- Birches—*Betula* spp.
- Hackberrys—*Celtis* spp.
- Hawthorns—*Crataegus* spp.
- American elm—*Ulmus americana*
- Grey alder—*Alnus incana*
- Wild rose—*Rosa* spp.
- Poplar, cottonwoods—*Populus* spp.

Morning cloak

Alan Schmierer, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sloalan/35746711342/in/album-72157634902796552/>, public domain

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Trowel Talk can be found on the [Lanark County Master Gardener's blogsite](#) and Ottawa Carleton Master Gardener's Website <https://mgottawa.ca/>



Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face, gardening questions.

[Friends of the Farm plant sale](#)

8:00 am to 1:00 pm
Sunday May 14th

Carp Farmers Market

8:00 am to 1:00 pm
Saturday May 6, 13

Ottawa Farmers Market

9:00 am to 1:00 pm
Sunday May 7

Article suggestions box

This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



Trowel Talk team:

Amanda Carrigan, Judith Cox, Andrea Knight, Julianne Labreche, Kelly Noel, Dale Odorizzi, Josie Pazdzior, Rob Stuart, Nancy McDonald, Penka Matanska, Gillian Boyd, Rebecca Last, Margaret Ryan, Lee Ann Smith, Agnieszka Keough, Mary Crawford, Heather Clemenson

Letters to editor: newsletter@mgottawa.ca

Banner Photograph: .Signs of spring, S.R.Bicket



Talks and Events

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:

<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

Talks given by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization to confirm venue. Zoom or other virtual meeting software is still in use by some societies.

Tuesday, April 18. 7:00 pm

Candace Dressler

Your Dreams and Nature's Needs

[FoF/MGOC lecture series](#) via zoom

Wednesday, April 19, 7:30 pm

Rob Stuart,

Gardening as we Age

[Pakenham Horticultural Society](#)

Thursday, April 20, 7:00 pm

Candace Dressler

Gardening with Native Plants in Ontario

[Ottawa Garden Club](#)

Monday, April 24, 7:00 pm

Rebecca Last

10 City Veggies

[Williamstown Green Thumbs](#)

Tuesday, May 2, 7:00 pm

Agnieszka Keough & Claire McCaughey,

Garden Design with Nature in Mind: Basic Steps and Beyond

[FoF/MGOC lecture series](#) via zoom

Wednesday, May 3, 7:00 pm

Nancy McDonald,

Tips & Tricks to make Gardening Easier and Fun

[Greely Gardening Group](#)

Thursday, May 4, 7:00 pm

Judith Cox,

Companion Planting

[Rideau Lakes Horticultural Society](#)

Tuesday, May 9, 7:30 pm

Nancy McDonald,

Digging in the Dirt is Good for Your Health

[West Carleton Garden Club and Horticultural Society](#)

Wednesday, May 10, 7:30 pm

Candace Dressler and Fran Dennett,

Native Plants in Ontario

[Barrhaven Garden Club](#)

Thursday, May 11, 2:30 pm

Judith Cox .

Hey you over here!! Attracting Pollinators.

[Revera Barrhaven Retirement](#)

Monday, May 15, 7:30 pm

Judith Cox

Kitchen Gardens through the Ages

[Eganville Horticultural Society](#)