

A close-up photograph of a plant with green, lance-shaped leaves and clusters of small, bright yellow flowers. The background is dark and out of focus, making the plant stand out. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent dark green box in the center of the image.

TEXT BY VANESSA FARNSWORTH

GROWING NATIVE

When using native plants in gardens, we use ecological principles, which is very different from how most people tend to garden. They tend to have a theme and they want their gardens to have a certain look and so they choose the plants based on that look. With native plant gardening you don't do that. You choose plants based on the conditions.

There is no question that incorporating native plants into gardens is on the upswing in the Kootenays as gardeners look for ways to diversify their landscapes by adding a greater variety of plants than what can normally be found in garden centres.

"Native plants offer a different kind of beauty," says Valerie Huff, co-founder of the Kootenay Native Plant Society. "So if you want to connect with the natural world in your own environment then you need to learn to appreciate the beauty and the diversity of native plants."

Huff points to pinkfairies (*Clarkia pulchella*) as a native plant whose wild beauty rivals anything that can be found in a garden centre. But incorporating native plants has benefits far beyond appreciating diverse forms of beauty. Consider, for instance, the unpredictable weather Kootenay residents have grown to expect in recent years.

"Increasingly we're finding extremes of conditions, which means that a lot of plants that used to be able to grow here can't grow as well," says Ross Waddell, co-founder of the Native Plant Society of British Columbia. "They're less well adapted to the extremes whereas our native plants, if they're grown in the right conditions, can usually handle the more extreme of the extremes."

Huff and Waddell both agree that the key to success with growing native plants is understanding their preferred ecologies and making sure that the gardens in which they will be planted closely replicates them.

"It really is a paradigm shift in the way we relate to the garden so when you are native plant gardening, it's not about just sticking a plant in a garden bed," Huff says. "It's

more about paying attention to the ecology that supports them. You really have to think about creating an environment where they will thrive."

Waddell echoes that sentiment.

"When using native plants in gardens, we use ecological principles, which is very different from how most people tend to garden," he says. "They tend to have a theme and they want their gardens to have a certain look and so they choose the plants based on that look. With native plant gardening you don't do that. You choose plants based on the conditions."

But incorporating native plants into our landscapes isn't just about meeting our needs or even the plant's. It's also about creating a healthy environment where nature itself can thrive.

"We do it for the birds and the bees and the rest of the web of life because it all connects," Huff says. "If we think about bees in particular, we have more than 400 species of native bees in our province. Some of these native bees have been evolving with native plants over evolutionary history. So if you lose the plants, you lose the diversity of bees."

As with anything else, there is a right way and a wrong way to go about collecting plants for your garden.

"If people start going out and digging plants out of the wild, that can destroy the population and the habitat for the plants," Waddell says. "So it's a bit of a cautionary note."

Huff is quick to second that.

"We always discourage people from going out in the wild and digging things up because you're just stealing from the wild. It's a

form of poaching," she says, adding, "Not only is it stealing from that natural environment but it's so unlikely that the plants will be able to be transplanted unless you know exactly what you're doing."

Nothing discourages a gardener quicker than dead plants or, for that matter, seeds that don't sprout when they are expected to. Huff encourages gardeners to start by learning what plants are available to them in their local ecosystems and branching out from there.

"Get to know what's there first," she says. "Start with one or two plants and get to know them. They have individual personalities and needs and wants."

Collecting seeds from native plants that are easy to grow such as pinkfairies or goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) will build confidence as will learning when best to sow seeds. Huff notes that autumn is often an excellent time to get native seeds in the ground since many require extended periods of sub-zero temperatures in order to germinate. They also require patience since it can take a couple of years for some native seeds to sprout and knowing that in advance can save you some unnecessary frustration.

Yet for native plant gardeners, the serendipity of growing these plants far exceeds the challenges.

"A lot of plants you buy in a garden centres are hybridized or selected for certain traits," Waddell says. "With native plants, the seeds or cuttings are normally wild collected so you're getting quite a bit of genetic and environmental variation. So when you're growing these plants, it's not necessarily consistent how each one will turn out. But that's part of the fun." ■