

# Gardening with Native Plants



There are several benefits of gardening with native plants:

- Native plants are virtually care-free. They do not require fertilizer or pesticides, and once established you may never even need to water them. Many are also deer and rabbit resistant.
- Native plants play a big role in our local ecosystem, being foundational in the food web of local wildlife. They support pollinators, and provide food and shelter to many other beneficial and beautiful insects.
- Some native plants can put down roots that are over 10 feet deep, which helps soak up and filter rainwater. When chosen and planted carefully, native plants can help mitigate flooding and prevent erosion.
- Native wildflowers are beautiful, providing wonderful texture and color to your garden.

## Preparing your seeds: cold moist stratification & scarification

Some native plant seeds will need preparation before planting, and this will be noted on the label. These extra steps imitate Indiana's seasons, helping break the seeds' hard outer coats and warmer temperatures after periods of cold triggering germination. Some native plant seeds can be planted directly outside in late fall when weather is consistently cold. Be sure to research each variety to determine what works best in your garden.

**Cold moist stratification:** place seed and medium in a labeled, sealed plastic bag and store in a refrigerator (33-40°F) for 30-90 days, depending on the instructions on the package. Stratification medium could be a damp paper towel, coffee filter, sand, vermiculite, or other horticultural-use medium.

**Scarification:** this is for seeds with hard coats, and it will be noted on the label if a seed needs to be scarified. Use a knife, file, or sandpaper to gently nick the coat. Some seeds can also be soaked overnight before planting.

## Winter Sowing

Plants native to Indiana can be started outdoors while the weather is still cold. Some seeds can be planted directly in the ground in late fall or winter. Native plant seeds and frost-hardy plant seeds can also be started in January-March in containers that act as mini-greenhouses (such as clear plastic milk jugs or clear plastic bins). There are many instructional articles and videos online that can show you this process in detail.

- More information on other side -

## Choosing your location

Choosing the right space for your native plants is key. A plant that needs full sun may not grow well if your garden only gets a half day of sunlight. Likewise, if your garden has very moist soil, trying to grow a plant that needs dry soil conditions will likely prove unsuccessful. Be sure to research what native plants will work best in your yard before selecting them. The Hamilton County Soil & Water Conservation District will have excellent recommendations based on the conditions in your yard.

If possible, try to plan and select a variety of native plants that have different bloom times, ranging from early spring to late fall, so that at least one or two wildflowers are blooming at the same time throughout the entire growing season.

## Sowing & caring for your native plants

Carefully read the label on your native plant seed as soon as you receive them. Native plants need to be planted during a specific time frame to germinate successfully. If the seed requires cold moist stratification or scarification, be sure to complete those steps first if you plan to start directly in the ground. You can also try the winter sowing method for most native plants.

When you start to see sprouts, don't water them unless conditions become hot and dry. Use a gentle setting on a hose or a slow-flow watering can if they need water.

If you are not sure whether that sprout in your garden is a baby wildflower or a weed, you can find pictures of your little wildflower sprouts on the Prairie Moon Nursery website. If you correctly identify a weed growing right next your native plant sprout, be careful if trying to remove it. The delicate roots of your sprout can be easily damaged.

Many perennial native plants wait until their second or third year to bloom, but don't let that discourage you from taking home other wildflower seeds to plant this year. During the first year, most of the growth takes place underground. The plants are putting their energy into growing strong before blooming. Consider interspersing annual native plants that will bloom the first year with perennial ones that will bloom later, so you will still have flowers the first year.

As fall arrives and some of your native plants begin to look a little straggly, it is tempting to cut them down and clear the dead material out the garden or flowerbed. If you wait until spring of the following year to do that, many insects, including some native bees and other pollinators, will thank you! Many species burrow into the dead plant stems and leaves in order to lay their eggs, and make a home for the winter.



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