

Gardening with Native Plants... Preserving the Flathead's Living Legacy

Red Monkeyflower



Steep mountain slopes, gentle foothills and expansive bottomlands combine to create our beautiful Flathead Valley. This diverse region of Montana provides many opportunities for using native plants in a variety of ways. Use the information on our website as a starting point in creating diverse, attractive and environmentally sensitive gardens and landscaping. It's a great way to celebrate Montana's natural heritage!

Recommended resources for your review:

The following articles and links are available on the Montana Native Plant Society, Native Plant Landscaping, Flathead Valley section ([www.mtnativeplants.org/Flathead Valley Native Landscaping](http://www.mtnativeplants.org/FlatheadValleyNativeLandscaping)). You can also pick up paper copies at NPS Flathead Chapter programs, which are held at 7 pm October-November & January-April on the third Wednesday of the month.

- ***Gardening with Native Plants... preserving the Flathead's Living Legacy*** (this document) -This is a primer on native plant gardening in the Flathead Area
- ***Recommended Species for Gardening and Landscaping in the Flathead Valley Area*** - with information on growing requirements, applications, wildlife use, and more.
- ***Resources for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead*** - This is a list of resources to help you find additional information including books and websites.
- ***Nurseries Selling Native Plants in the Flathead*** - A list of local nurseries producing native plants.
- ***Guidelines for Collecting Native Plants*** - The Montana Native Plant Society discourages the digging of native plants. However in some cases, collecting native plants may be justified. These guidelines were developed to help those wishing to collect native plant materials do so without damaging our native plant populations and communities.
- ***Sources of Native Plants - 2010 Edition*** - Here is a newly researched statewide guide to sources of native plant material for your landscape needs.

- ***Creating Native Landscapes*** - This is a comprehensive guide developed by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Bridger Plant Materials Center. Link includes information for ordering free paper copies.
- ***Montana Weed Control Association*** -Website on Montana noxious weeds including photo identification guide and a range of management methods.
- ***Firewise Communities*** -Website with lots of resources and information about protecting your home from wildfire. Not necessarily native plant specific.

What is a native plant?

Native plants are plant species that have evolved in place over geologic time or occur naturally in a specific region or area. Where particular native plants are found across the landscape is largely a response to climate and the result of adaptation to specific site conditions. Montana native plants are those plants that were here before Euro/American settlement and are indigenous to Montana. Large-scale changes to the flora of North America occurred as a result of European settlement and the introduction of exotic plants. We recommend planting species native to Montana and when appropriate, plants native to the Flathead or adjacent areas in NW Montana. Remember that plant species that are native to North America may be exotic in Montana and plants native to other areas of Montana may be exotic in the Flathead.

What is an exotic plant?

An exotic species is a plant that was introduced into a particular area by humans, either intentionally or accidentally. They are also called non-natives or aliens. While some exotics are harmless and may be used to help meet your landscaping objectives, others pose serious threats to local biological diversity and can become serious pests. The “What should I avoid” section that follows has additional information. Escaped exotics can change the composition of native plant communities, successfully compete for resources, displace native species, reduce plant diversity, contribute to soil erosion and carry exotic insects and disease. Exotic species can also diminish the availability of food plants for wildlife, and alter the behavior of native pollinators, plant-eating insects and fruit-eating birds. Invasion by exotics is one factor that contributes to the threat of native plant extinctions. Don’t forget that birds, dogs, other animals, people, vehicles and water can transport and spread plant seeds. An exotic plant from your yard may become a problem in a natural area near you, so during the planning stage consider how invasive a particular exotic species is, and determine if your landscaping objectives can be met by using a Montana native plant instead. Also become familiar with plants that are categorized as noxious weeds by the state of Montana. See the enclosed information about Montana’s noxious weeds for additional details.

What is a cultivar?

Nurseries may advertise certain plant species as “native”; however, they may be cultivars. A cultivar is a plant species that has been selected horticulturally for characteristics such as size, flower color, or seed production. These cultivated varieties, often propagated vegetatively, may be of unknown lineage. Many of these plants, developed from native species, do not have the same genetic composition as natives. Sometimes cultivars are more aggressive and can crowd out other native species. In restoration and native landscaping, cultivars should be avoided if possible, especially when they might contaminate the gene pool of naturally occurring native plants of the same species. This is of special importance in the urban-interface zone where natural vegetation and man-made landscapes come into close contact.

Why should I plant native plants?

- **NATIVE PLANTS ARE ADAPTED**

Montana offers the home landscaper, gardener and reclamation specialist a wide variety of native plants, including colorful wildflowers, unique grasses, interesting shrubs and trees, both evergreen and deciduous. These natives are genetically adapted to our unique landscape, with its variable and unpredictable climate, soil requirements, temperature extremes of hot and cold, and elevations. Native plants, properly sited, are adapted to these cold, dry, often erratic conditions and display less evidence of stress. They often require less water and won't require fertilization once they are established in the proper site. Remember that some Montana natives are adapted to cool, shady or moist areas along stream banks, some to low plains, valleys and dry prairies, while others are suited to higher elevation sites. There are Montana native plants suitable for your site-specific landscaping needs!

- **NATIVE PLANTS ARE LESS INVASIVE**

Montana native plants that evolved here belong here. They have natural partners that keep them from becoming invasive. These natural predators and diseases are compromised when non-native plants are introduced. Native plants are part of a natural community of plants and other organisms that developed in a particular landscape with particular conditions, and have reached a balance that includes changes. Native plants tend to stay within naturally evolved limits on their chosen landscape. Help prevent future weed problems – plant natives!

- **NATIVE PLANTS CELEBRATE OUR NATURAL HERITAGE**

Montana supports a unique floral landscape that is worth promoting and protecting. Montana natives inspire a sense of place and connect us to this land of prairies and mountains. Native landscapes reflect where we are and celebrate our unique climatic and ecological conditions. We have the opportunity to express our diversity by maintaining a

variety of distinctive native plantings. Such plantings foster pride in our regional communities and heritage, and counter the trend toward the homogenization of landscapes. Native plant gardens, big and small, provide an educational opportunity and are a great way to introduce students of all ages to the complexities of the natural environment. Enjoyment of native species can broaden public awareness of natural environments and the species they support.

- NATIVE PLANTS PROTECT BIODIVERSITY AND RESTORE REGIONAL LANDSCAPES

Throughout much of the United States, some species of native plants are scarce and are in danger of becoming extinct. Planting native species, especially those that came from seeds from the local area, may enhance gene flow between native populations separated by development and habitat fragmentation. Even small native plant gardens can help restore the integrity of regional landscapes. You can help perpetuate the native vegetation that is necessary for wildlife and natural ecosystem function by being mindful of what you plant on your property.

- NATIVE PLANTS PROVIDE FOR WILDLIFE NEEDS

Planting native trees can result in increased numbers of native birds. Many birds and other fauna are adapted to using native trees and prefer them for food and resting places. Many native grasses provide food and shelter for birds and small mammals, and native shrubs provide browse for deer, moose and other large mammals, as well as food for birds and small critters. Conversely, some native species are less attractive to browsing wildlife and can be selected to discourage urban browsers. Native plants and animals evolved together and depend on each other in a mutually beneficial web. Even beneficial native insects need native plants to carry out their important roles in the ecosystem.

- NATIVE PLANTS ARE FUN!

Most of all, native plants are fun, interesting, colorful and attractive. They can provide hours of enjoyment ranging from hands-on puttering to admiring your mature, native plant landscape from your favorite lawn chair. You can help reestablish native plant communities in our part of Montana by choosing to landscape with native plants. Regardless of the scale of the project, you can help conserve water and other natural resources while restoring and celebrating the unique character of northwest Montana landscape.

How do I get started?

Begin to tune into native plants and their habitats. The Montana Native Plant Society sponsors hikes and field trips that provide opportunities to learn about native plants and plant communities. While hiking or driving the backroads around NW Montana, take note of where certain native plants grow, and what plants are often found growing together. Because the Flathead encompasses grasslands and forest, arid sites and wetlands, it is important to conduct a site inventory to determine the conditions on your property. Use the *Recommended Species for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead*

guide and the *Creating Native Landscapes* brochure to match up your soil, light and water conditions with appropriate species of grasses, wildflowers, groundcovers, shrubs, trees, vines or cactus. These references will also help you identify plants that are perennial, biennial, annual, or self-seeders. Then consider using native plants that occur together in natural habitats. The Flathead Valley is in both zones 3 and 4; you may see references to that when you do plant research. Our average annual precipitation ranges from about 16 inches in Kalispell to 29 in West Glacier. If you are building a new home, work with your contractor to ensure that displaced topsoil is stored so you can use it to develop landscaped areas, and leave as many natives as possible undisturbed. Your soil contains dormant seeds as well as plant parts that may later sprout. See *Resources for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead* for more information on how to work within nature's guidelines. Prepare your area for planting using the recommended strategies in the *Creating Native Landscapes* brochure. Weed control and site preparation may need to be done prior to planting and while native plants are becoming established on the site. Remember, it takes time for seeds or transplants to become firmly rooted. You should expect native plants to take longer to become established and extra care, weeding, shelter from sun or wind, and water may be required.

Information on soil testing is available at local nurseries and from MSU Extension at <http://msuextension.org/publications/yardandgarden/MT200705AG.pdf>

Plants or seeds?

If you are a beginner, it may be easiest to start by putting in a few potted native plants rather than planting from seed. Use the *Recommended Species for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead* to help you with your selections. If a landscaping plant is not listed there, chances are it is not a Montana native plant. Check websites or contact sellers on the list of *Nurseries Selling Native Plants in the Flathead* to see what is available locally. Some plants, like Lewis's blue flax (*Linum lewisii*), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) and blanket flower (*Gaillardia aristata*) are very easy to grow from seed. Try them first, and then expand as your confidence grows. If you are planting native plants from seed, patience is the key. Native plants, like any other plant, require care and attention for them to look their best. Growing native plants takes time, but once they are established you will be rewarded with natural beauty, hardiness and minimal maintenance.

Don't worry if you don't know the scientific names for plants. *Recommended Species for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead* has both common and scientific names. However, when you go to the nursery or look at a seed packet, check the scientific name to be sure you are getting what you want. Often the same common name will be used for very different plants and the scientific name will help you get the right plant. Use one of the picture books listed in *Resources for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead* if you need to see what a plant looks like. *Wildflowers of Glacier National Park and Surrounding Areas* by Shannon Kimball and Peter Lesica or *Northern Rocky Mountain*

Wildflowers by Wayne Phillips both have wonderfully clear pictures of many plants native to this area.

If you don't see what you are looking for at the nursery, ask for it! More natives are being grown all the time and as the demand increases, so will the supply.

Where did my native seed come from?

Definitions of "native" vary from one grower and nursery to the next, and may include cultivated varieties (cultivars) of native species, as well as native plants from another part of the state. For restoration and native habitat projects, it is usually best to use plants originating from the nearest available natural sites. Use the *Sources of Native Plants* for Montana to help you locate seed and plant sources. Simply ask where your nursery's plants come from and try to get plants as locally grown as possible. When they are available, it is always better to buy native Montana seeds or transplants from a local producer.

Can I collect plants and seed in the wild?

It is extremely important that you become familiar with the legal criteria and environmental ethics involved in collecting plants and seeds from the wild. Seed and plant collecting is prohibited in many areas of Montana. In general, we discourage collections from the wild unless permission is granted on private land, or plants and seeds are rescued from areas that are scheduled to be disturbed by new construction, road building, etc. Read the enclosed *Plant Collecting Guidelines*, and consult *Native Plant Gardening and Landscaping References for the Flathead* for more information.

When do I seed or plant?

Fall is a good time to plant wildflower (forb) seeds. Going through a Montana winter will help break down the germination inhibitors associated with many native plant seeds. This process is termed stratification. Species that require cool soil temperatures for germination will be favored using this method. Fall planting is from October to November (or later if the ground is not frozen) in this area, and varies depending on the temperature and moisture conditions. Native grass seed sown earlier than late October may germinate if weather is unseasonably warm and the seedlings may winter kill. Fall plantings generally do not need to be watered and work best if you receive snow cover in the winter. You may not have great success with fall planting if the area to be planted is dry and exposed to wind. If fall seeding is not possible, seeds can also be planted as soon as the ground is frost-free, generally from April to mid-June. If forb seeds are sown without being prepared with moist stratification (a period of cold, moist treatment),

germination of some species will not begin until the following spring, after the seed has gone through a winter treatment. If your seeds don't come up right away, don't give up on them until they have gone through a winter. Spring seedlings may require supplemental watering if conditions are dry. Keeping the soil moist for 3 to 6 weeks after planting will ensure good germination. Potted plants should be transplanted in the spring, before it gets hot, and will need to be watered until they are established.

Where do I plant?

For landscaping purposes, it is important to remember that plants growing in our region are specifically adapted to site conditions determined by elevation (which affects temperature and degree of exposure to sun and wind), topography (which affects moisture, light availability, and exposure), and the amount of shading from other plants. Soil moisture and light availability are important limiting factors that determine where a particular plant can grow. Matching plants to site conditions will usually result in the best plant growth. Check *Recommended Species for Native Plant Landscaping in the Flathead* to see what conditions are necessary for optimal plant growth. Also look to see if a plant is an annual, a biennial or a perennial and place each in an area that meets your landscaping objectives.

How can I reduce fire danger to my home?

If your home is located within or adjacent to wildlands or if you are considering building a home in the urban-wildland interface, you will want to consider the possibility of wildland fire. Fires have shaped the western landscape for centuries and the Flathead is part of a fire dependent ecosystem. Fire is a natural process that will happen at some time in our dry, arid climate. As a homeowner, what you do with your home and with the property immediately surrounding your home can make the difference if a wildland fire occurs near you. Recent research by Jack Cohen, a research scientist at the Fire Sciences Laboratory in Missoula, has demonstrated that home ignitability, rather than wildland fuels, is the principle cause of home losses during urban-wildland interface fires. The key components to help make your home defensible are design elements, elimination of flammable roofing materials such as cedar shingles, and reducing the presence of burnable vegetation (debris, wood piles, shrubs, wood decks) immediately adjacent to your home. A 20 minute video called *Wildfire! Preventing Home Ignitions* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0iR8o54hDU) explains this concept well. The website *Firewise Communities* (www.firewise.org) will give you some suggestions and recommends native plant species that are fire resistant. It should be noted that crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*) is mistakenly listed as a native plant. It is not and we do not recommend its use.

What about seed mixes?

Almost all commercially available wildflower mixes (“meadow in a can”) contain both natives and non-natives, and many include weedy species. Recent research has demonstrated that many mixes are improperly labeled and contain weeds. We do not recommend planting pre-packaged wildflower seed mixes because it is difficult to determine what is really in the mix and the relative percentages of each species. Mixes often contain a high percentage of species that are outside their natural ranges. We suggest buying individual native wildflower seeds or customizing your own mix. Many wildflower species may only be available in single-seed form anyway. If you are buying packaged wildflower seeds, remember that “adapted to Montana” is not the same as “native to Montana” and may indicate the presence of non-native species.

What should I avoid?

Some nurseries and garden centers sell exotic species as “wildflowers”. Some of these plants are not native to Montana or even to North America. Some wildflower seeds are not native to Montana but are native to states near us. An example is California poppy. Some of these North American plants may be used without danger of becoming invasive problems. But Montana native species are adapted to our landscape and have built-in controls to keep them from becoming too invasive. The dangers of planting exotic species are well documented and include such things as the loss of Montana wetlands to aggressive aliens like purple loosestrife, the conversion of many acres of land in western Montana to spotted knapweed, and the spread of Dalmatian toadflax on Mount Helena. We recommend that you avoid the following species that may be found in wildflower mixes or as single-species seeds: baby’s breath (*Gypsophila paniculata*), bouncing bet (*Saponaria officinalis*), corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*), bachelor buttons (*Centaurea cyanus*), dame’s rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), and Queen Ann’s lace (*Daucus carota*). Some mixes still contain oxeye daisy (*Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*), a plant that is a noxious weed in Montana.

We also advise you to avoid using the following plant species that are very invasive. Instead, try to find a native plant or a non-aggressive exotic to meet your landscaping or reclamation needs: black medic (*Medicago lupulina*), Canada bluegrass (*Poa compressa*), cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), creeping bellflower (*Campanula rapunculoides*), crested wheatgrass (*Agropyron cristatum*), Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), orchard grass (*Dactylis glomerata*), Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), soft brome (*Bromus mollis*), teasel (*Dipsacus sylvestris*), white sweet clover (*Melilotus alba*), yellow sweet clover (*Melilotus officinalis*), and members of the spurge (*Euphorbia*) family.

For more information on plant species that are, or may become, invasive in Montana, visit the Montana Native Plant Society’s website at: www.mtnativeplants.org In the “Native Plant Landscaping” section there is a paper called “Guidelines for Selecting Horticultural Plant Material for Montana”.

What about lawns?

The Audubon Society has determined that home lawns blanket 25 million acres of land in the U.S. The average American lawn is 1/3 acre, generates 2 tons of clippings a year and consumes up to 170,000 gallons of water in a single summer. A typically treated lawn receives 3-20 pounds of fertilizers and 5-10 pounds of pesticides a year. The average homeowner spends 40 hours mowing the lawn each year and \$8.5 billion is spent annually on retail sales of residential lawn care products and equipment.

Shrubs, trees, perennial flowers and groundcovers usually consume less water than grass (check plant requirements), add interest and color to your landscape, and provide a welcoming habitat for birds and butterflies. To reduce the size of an already established lawn, try planting groundcovers, low shrubs or perennials beneath mature trees, or expanding the size of an existing plant bed. Eliminate grass from areas where it is hard to grow (dense shade, wet spots, exposed areas, steep slopes) and plant natives there instead.

For suggestions on creating a mowable turf using sod forming grasses, see the *Creating Native Landscapes* brochure and *Recommended Species for Native Plant Gardening in the Flathead*.

Conclusion:

Consider your landscape and garden a work in progress that can change and evolve as you learn more and become more adventurous. It all begins with the first seeds you sow. Who knows, it may be the beginning of a love affair with Montana's native plants!

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