TOM'S GARDEN BLOG DECEMBER 2023

Native Plants: A Hot Topic

In the United States, a native plant is defined as one that was naturally found in a particular area before European colonization.

Native plants provide food, nesting, and shelter for birds, insects, and animals. Native plants also take less care such as watering and soil amendments.

Planting native plants in the landscape is a subject that is very popular these days for magazine and internet articles. Trees and shrubs provide nuts, berries, and shelter for birds all summer. A lot of the native plants are hosts for insect larva that feed on the leaves and become food for birds, especially the young birds.

Wildflowers offer nectar to bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. These plants are also just nice to have around because they look good in your yard.

Use the Audubon Native Plants Data Base to identify native plants for your particular area: www.audubon.org/native-plants

On this site you can narrow down choices to the specific plants you are looking for. Try it! It's free! Go onto the website and put in your zip code.

You can also view all the native plants for your area to get new ideas.

USDA Hardiness Zone Update

Author Amy Stone-November 17, 2023

The USDA recently announced it has updated its Plant Hardiness Zone map.

You will see that Ohio has 4 zones, including: 5b; 6a; 6b; and 7a.

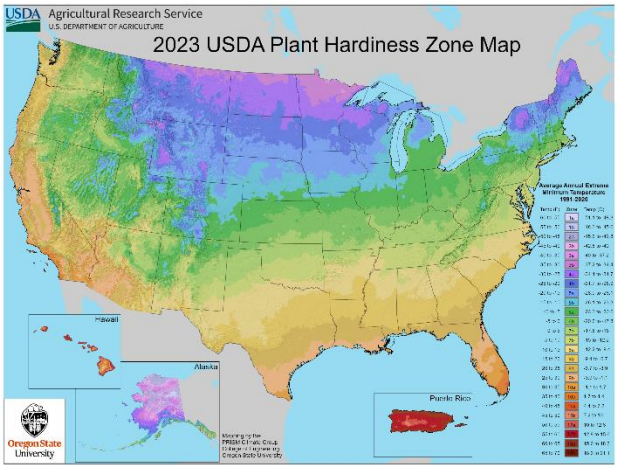
There are links to learn more about how to use the maps. The hardiness map looks at low temperatures and indicates an average low for each of the zones.

Information on the updated map can be found at the USDA website: https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/

The website also includes a "Tips For Growers" section, which provides information about USDA Agricultural Research Service programs of interest to gardeners.

When compared to the 2012 map, the 2023 version shows that about half of the country has shifted to the next warmer zone

or half zone, such as 6a and 6b.



Tis The Season

I was wondering recently what type of plants were around at the time of Jesus's birth over 2,000 years ago.

Bethlehem is located 5 miles south of Jerusalem between the hill country and the desert in Judea. The slopes of the surrounding hills and adjacent fields provided fertile agricultural lands for harvesting wheat and barley, which likely gave the village its Hebrew name "House of Bread."

These sloping hills also contained terraced orchards of olive trees, exposed patches of limestone pocked with natural caves and large stretches of natural brush.

This made the area ideal for local shepherds to graze flocks of sheep and goats.

The area has a Mediterranean climate, so it is similar to other regions of the world such as South America, South Africa, California, and Australia.

Familiar plants that dotted the landscape were date palms, grapes, figs, and mulberries.

Edible vegetables mentioned in the Bible were onions, garlic, leeks, cucumbers, citron, lentils, and fava beans. Keep in mind that these vegetables may have looked different than what we are used to today. The main staples in peoples' diets were wheat and barley.

Plants like cotton and flax were woven into cloth. Papyrus was used for making paper and various reeds, grass, and other plant stems were used for making baskets.

Edible fruits and nuts were also grown in this area. Pistachios, pomegranates, figs, almonds, walnuts, and quince were all abundant. Quince was likely the "forbidden fruit" rather than apples as we know them now.

Frankincense and Myrrh are resins produced by certain trees or shrubs that grew in the dry country of southern Arabia and northern Africa.

The Basics About Soil PH

Commonly, native plants grow well in native soil. That is because the native soil has just the right amount of acidic/alkalinity for these plants. In an area such as a housing allotment where the native soil has been disturbed, amendments will be needed. When introducing new varieties into the landscape, the PH requirements can differ with what is available.

Each plant has its own requirements for PH. In the right conditions, a plants roots can absorb nutrients from the soil. If these PH conditions are off, the nutrients are "locked up" and cannot be absorbed by the plant. Unless it's a very small area such as a plant pot, soil PH is very difficult to change and maintain that change. The water you use for watering plants can change the PH of soil. My soil and well water is very alkaline. Rainwater that is collected is normally neutral and doesn't affect the soil conditions.

The majority of plants grow well in a neutral PH of 6 to 7.5 PH. You can have your soil tested for nutrients and PH or use test kits from garden centers. I like to have my soil tested by the University Extension every 3 years. Cost is about $20 to $30.

Diseases in the Summer Garden

Plant diseases can be devastating to a vegetable garden in the heat and humidity of summer. Powdery and downy mildew on cucumber and squash plants, leaf spot on peppers, and early/late blight on tomatoes are some of the common problems we, as gardeners, face. In most cases, once you have it, there is no cure, so the best advice is to prevent the disease before it starts.

Cleaning up and disposing of dead plant material in the fall is important. Rotating the crops to different areas in the garden is also a good idea.

One of the most useful strategies in fighting disease is to purchase disease-resistant varieties of seeds and plants. Although I have my favorite heirloom plants that I enjoy each year, The new hybrids can overcome some of these disease problems.

Growing resistant varieties of your favorite plants can go a long way toward a successful and care-free summer garden.

One source I have found for purchasing tomato and pepper seeds is "Totally Tomatoes." www.totallytomato.com This company has a seemingly endless variety of heirloom and disease-resistant tomato and pepper seeds. Starting your own plants from seed can be a very rewarding experience. If you are new to this idea, start out small and give it a try.

If you are purchasing seedlings from a nursery or big box store, read the plant tags and look for resistant plants.

Coming next month:

Ideas for repurposing those cut Christmas trees.