

What's So Special About Native Plants-- *Aren't they just weeds?*

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Perhaps in some people's opinion, native plants are just weeds. Certainly my grandmother and mother considered most natives just that—weeds. And so did I for a long time until I joined the Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT) and began to learn how essential and lovely native plants really are.

However the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center says native plants are special and important because they:

- **Conserve water**
- **Mitigate flooding**
- **Reduce mowing costs**
- **Save money on fertilizer and pesticides**
- **Provide habitat for birds, butterflies and other wildlife**
- **Reduce temperatures in urban areas**
- **Establish a sense of place**

Let's look at how natives do that.

Conserve Water

Once their roots are established, native plants growing in their ecosystem can survive on the rainfall they receive—no irrigation necessary. They also have long root systems that not only help the plants survive dry spells but also channel rain deeply into the soil, where it can be stored for future use. Those roots also help to clean the water as it soaks into the ground. This is an important feature when recharging our aquifer.



Lindheimer muhly, *Muhlenbergia lindheimeri*

Mitigate flooding



By directing more rainfall into the soil, thus reducing runoff, natives can mitigate flooding. Grasslands and beds of perennial native plants act as sponges, soaking up water and slowing down its flow, reducing topsoil erosion. In our Central Texas area, nicknamed Flash Flood Alley, this is a particularly important feature of natives and native landscaping.

Perennial bed of Winecup, Mealy Blue Sage, Coneflower plants. Redbud and Mexican Plum trees in background.

Reduce Mowing Costs



Lawn of Habiturf, a mix of Buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*), Blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and Curly-mesquite (*Hilaria belangeri*). LBJ Wildflower Center

When non-native lawns are replaced by native short grasses or by beds filled with native plants or a combination of both, mowing is reduced or eliminated, thus reducing maintenance costs—and labor. Native short grasses generally recommend mowing once a month or twice a year. If the grasses are

combined with perennial beds, landscape maintenance can amount to a seasonal schedule instead of weekly.

Save Money on Fertilizer and Pesticides

Did you know that natives are money-savers for your budget because they not only require less water and maintenance, but they also need no synthetic fertilizers or pesticides because they are adapted to local soils and pests with no help from you? Cha-ching. In fact you can “burn-out” some native plants if they are treated too well; once established, benign neglect is often the only care from you required. A little compost and mulch will take care of most natives.



The yellow aphids on this Antelopehorn milkweed do not need treatment. The plant will not die from aphids, but pesticides will kill caterpillars and butterflies.



Fertilizer will kill Blackfoot daisy, planted here with Red yucca. Good soil, organic mulch, and watering will also significantly shorten the daisy’s life. Benign neglect is best.

Provide Habitat for Birds, Butterflies and Other Wildlife

Do you enjoy attracting butterflies, hummers, birds, and other animals to your yard? Did you know that natives will attract more critters than non-native plants because the critters and plants co-evolved and are perfectly suited to each other? The plants provide food and shelter for the creatures that make up the ecosystem.



Cedar Waxwings on Possumhaw tree. They can strip the berries, gobbling them quickly.



Texas Crescent and Bordered Patch butterflies on fall blooming White mistflower.



Bumblebee on Cenizo flowers.

Reduce temperatures in urban areas



An arborist friend asked, “What do you call an area with no trees? A desert!” We all know how hot summers can be here in Central Texas and trees with their shade plus releasing moisture from their leaves help to cool us and our environment. For proof just observe any parking lot that has some shade trees. Where are the prized parking places? In the shade, of course.

Think carefully before cutting down a tree or “lifting” its branches. Our trees aren’t very tall because of limited water and often lack of soil. Their branches don’t naturally grow very high over our heads. Look at the trees in the picture above. Removing too many lower branches reduces a tree’s leaf mass—and the leaves make its food. Loss of too many leaves can starve a tree and ultimately slowly kill it. If your tree suddenly sprouts suckers on its branches, it is struggling to produce food. It needs help!

Establish a Sense of Place—Central Texas



Tx Mountain Laurel

Everyone loves our beautiful wildflowers, but are you aware that other natives are equally beautiful—and help Central Texas look like Central Texas!



Woolly Stemodia



Red Yucca

Yellow
Rain Lily



Scarlet Leatherflower



Eryngo

Where Do You Find More Native Plants and Information?

Join a local chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas (NPSOT) www.npsot.org/wp/join-renew/
New Braunfels Chapter <https://npsot.org/wp/newbraunfels/>
Lindheimer Chapter <https://npsot.org/wp/lindheimer/>
Guadalupe Chapter <https://npsot.org/wp/guadalupe/>

All chapter meetings are free and open to the public. Currently no chapters are meeting, but we hope later this year meetings will resume. Check individual chapters' websites for meeting details.

Headwaters at the Comal—watch for programming for all ages

Plant Haus—The nursery is participating with the New Braunfels Chapter of NPSOT to make more Central Texas native plants available for sale. Four plants are featured each season.

<https://npsot.org/wp/newbraunfels/nice-program/>

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's Native Plant database <https://www.wildflower.org/plants-main> is always an excellent resource. They have a how-to section on specific topics such as how to plan a native plant garden and how to care for new plants. <https://www.wildflower.org/learn/how-to>

To buy native plants, keep your eyes open for NPSOT plant sales on Earth Day at Headwaters and Westside Community Center, also at Folkfest and the Monarch Festival at Fischer Park.

Grow Native!!