

Native plants fit the climate, diversify a landscape and create a sense of place

By Lexie Heinle / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Saturday, April 4, 2015 12:15 am

Sue Dawson's first native plant in 1998 helped her keep a flower bed.

She and her husband were debating turning the area back into grass, but the false sunflower clinched the deal.

"He liked the flower, and I liked the fact that it was native," Dawson said.

Since then, Dawson has slowly incorporated plants that are native to Nebraska into her Lincoln garden. She estimates that she has 60 to 70 percent native plants now.

The 61-year-old gardener said she enjoys the ease of growing native plants like little bluestem and prairie dropseed to support insect life.

"It's all interdependent," Dawson said. "Yes, you're gardening for the insects, but you're also gardening for yourself."

Christina Hoyt, community landscape specialist at the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, said the use of native plants is an important part of creating a sustainable landscape. Although native plants are defined as plants naturally grown in a region, that region can be as small as Nebraska or as big as the North America continent.

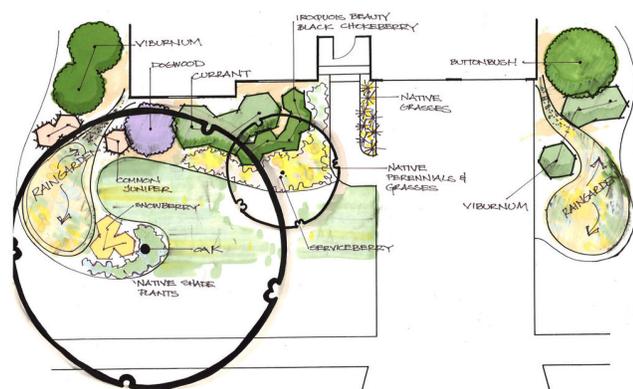
To be successful, native plants should be used in locations similar to their traditional locations, with similar rainfall, sunlight and soil composition.

Well-placed native plants are more prepared to handle Nebraska's climate, requiring less water and maintenance. Additionally, they increase the diversity of the landscape, benefiting insects and animals and creating a sense of place.

That sense of place can sometimes be an obstacle, though. There's a negative misconception of a native landscape looking like an uncontrollable weed patch.

"For a little bit, it's going to be a part of us as people get more used to embracing our natural aesthetic that is Nebraska," Hoyt said.

Dawson said her garden, with its focus on native plants and pollinators, often receives compliments from the neighbors. It's possible to use native plants to create a formal landscape with clean lines or a well-designed yet more natural garden.



nativelandscaping-graphic

A traditional garden can be transformed into a sustainable landscape of native plants.

Hoyt recommends that homeowners begin by asking themselves what problem they are trying to solve with their landscaping. Do they want to decrease their air-conditioning or heating costs, or do they want more habitats for animals and insects? Then they can include native plants that satisfy their requirements and location.

For example, the Chinese plant butterfly bush is popular because it attracts those insects, while buttonbush, which is native to North America, supports not only the butterflies, but also caterpillars. Additionally, the buttonbush works well in rain gardens, which help to reduce stormwater runoff.

It's a relatively new trend to consider the ecological impact of a garden. In a 2015 survey by the American Society of Landscape Architects, the participants ranked native plants as the most popular project type at 85 percent, with drought-tolerant plants close behind at 83 percent.

“For a long time, we have thought of our landscapes like wallpaper,” Hoyt said. “It's just something that is supposed to look pretty, instead of realizing that landscapes are ecological systems, and they're living things.”

Like other living things, plants like to touch. Hoyt said one of the most common mistakes people make is spacing the plants too far apart and isolating them. Plants don't grow as well, and the landscape can look sterile. Additionally, putting plants closer together can cut down on weeding.

Other recommendations are experimenting and mixing plant types, such as grasses with perennials.

Mixing types is also important to increase plant diversity, according to Alison Krohn, an environmental inspector for the Nebraska Department of Roads.

She described the typical lawn as a “biological desert” with a lack of insects and other animals.

Hoyt recommends people give native plants a try.

“People are just worried about not knowing and making mistakes,” Hoyt said. “I think the great thing about gardening is that it's something you can learn, you aren't going to completely do it wrong. Even if you are taking out a little patch of lawn and trying for the first time your hand at growing some native grasses, you are improving your local urban environment.”

For Dawson, whose garden is a registered pollinator habitat and monarch way station, gardening for itself is rewarding.

“It's just a joy to go out there and see what's growing,” she said.