

Native Plants

Native BC Plants and Your Garden



There are many wonderful plants native to British Columbia, and many that have been brought to our province by traveling humans, birds and cargo. In recent years, there has been increased attention to the appropriate role for native plants in our urban gardens. Some suggest that native plants are intrinsically “better” than the “ornamentals” that originated elsewhere. This article may help you make an informed choice on whether and when it may be advantageous to buy native plants.

Are native BC plants more disease and insect resistant than ornamentals?

Native plants that remain in their native locations (forests, meadows, swamps, mountains or river banks), where they were “naturalized” over centuries, often develop resistance to local insects and diseases. These natural defenses become insignificant though if a native plant is put into a new setting, such as an urban garden. Although travel has introduced new insects and diseases that BC plants cannot resist, the lifespan of an urban garden plant depends more on the homeowner’s knowledge of their plants, than where the plant originated. Native plants will thrive in your urban garden if you live in an environment close to their natural setting.

Do native BC plants require less water?

Again, native plants are no different from ornamentals. Some require water year ‘round, others cope with extremes of water and drought, while still others prefer a dry environment. The key question is, what is the plant’s natural environment, regardless of where it comes from? Ask garden centre staff for plants that can survive a drought and that are appropriate for the plant zone in which you live. Chances are some of the plants they recommend will be native to BC while others will have come from elsewhere.

Do native BC plants attract wildlife?

Absolutely! And that’s why some people, schools and organizations use them in their

gardens: to attract birds, butterflies, amphibians and invertebrates. Be aware, though, that berry producing plants might encourage visits from wildlife that could put humans and pets at risk.

When should native BC plants be used?

Without any question, plants native to British Columbia should be used in environments that simulate their wild setting, especially where they will be undisturbed. Examples are in the rebuilding of green spaces, such as parks, where humans and wildlife seek homes; in repairing the banks of streams and rivers; along highways and in reclamation of industrial sites such as mines.

Native plants can also be used to great effect in ornamental plantings. Be sensitive to their specific growing requirements including soil, drainage, exposure, moisture and preferred companion plants. In ornamental settings, treat the native plant with the same consideration you would give an ornamental in terms of pruning (health, shape, berry and flower) and disease control.

Where can you buy native BC plants?

At your local garden centre! BC’s wholesale growers provide a wide selection of plants that garden centres can order, including trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers, wetland and aquatic species. Remember to tell garden centre staff whether you want a plant for a sun, shade, wet or dry location, as well as its desired height, whether it has showy blooms and how much it spreads. They’ll be able to recommend particular plants and the care you should give them, and should carry books on natives for your area. If they don’t carry native plants and reference books, ask them to place an order because they are available from nearby growers! ■

Thanks to Bruce & Lauren Peel, Rod Natavos and Paulus Vrijmoed for assistance with this article. For information on native plants: www.npsbc.org (Native Plant Society of BC).

PHOTO: Frank Skellern: *Symphoricarpos albus* (common snowberry)