

Gardening Basics

Plants that Bring Nature into your Landscape



"Butterfly on Passion Flower 3" by Wha'ppen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

July and August can be challenging months for gardeners in North Central Texas, but they can also be some of the most fulfilling. Our social media has been filled with pictures from our members of anoles (those cute little lizards that hide out in the shade and show up in the evening), and caterpillars and their chrysalis and the beautiful butterflies emerging to dry their wings. It's been a real-life lesson as some disappear when a flock of birds is spotted or don't make it past the chrysalis stage, but nature is nature and what better place to watch it than your own backyard?!

One thing all these members have in common is that they have planted an assortment of native plants that will support our local wildlife. Of course, we all try to have some milkweeds to help the monarch butterfly migration continue north, but there are so many other plants that will also make our landscapes a haven for nature and provide real-life learning opportunities for our children, grandchildren, and neighborhoods.

Cultivating a wildlife habitat is not hard and doesn't mean that your landscape must look like it belongs in a park somewhere. Natives can be planted in conventional landscapes very nicely. The secret is to select natives just as you would any other plant for a particular location, plant them in defined beds and keep them controlled with prudent pruning and thinning.

Here are a few easy replacements you can make this fall **for wildlife attraction in the Spring**:

Carolina Jessamine, *Gelsemium sempervirens*. This beautiful vine is evergreen! And is one of the first things to bloom in the spring, so it provides a good nectar source before many other sources are available. Additionally, it can be kept neat and tidy with your kitchen shears – no special tools are required.

Coral Honeysuckle, *Lonicera sempervirens*. If a **vine** covering a trellis is needed to block a view or add interest to your landscape, consider this. It is also evergreen and can be controlled with minimal effort with your kitchen shears. With its red blooms, coral honeysuckle is a hummingbird magnet, so consider planting it near a window so you can see the show!

Passionflower Vine, *Passiflora incarnata*. This is a deciduous vine that dies to the ground each winter but grows like crazy when warm weather hits. Our members are thrilled when the first Gulf Fritillary butterflies appear in early spring.

Frogfruit, *Phyla nodiflora*. If there is a space in your landscape in need of ground cover, consider frogfruit. This sweet little groundcover is both a larval host and a source of nectar for the Common Buckeye, a far from common-looking butterfly with



Courtesy Sally and Andy Wasowski, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

beautiful buckeye markings on both his forewings and two on each hindwing. The little white flowers are a real bonus in the groundcover world.

Pigeonberry, *Rivina humilis*. This groundcover lives up to its name by producing lovely little red berries for foraging wildlife and birds. What's unexpected, is that it often produces berries on one stem while flowers are still very beautiful on the next!

Looking for some great blooming flowers? There are almost too many to choose from, so we recommend the [Native Plant Butterfly Garden](#) list compiled by the local chapter of the Native Plant Society of Texas or for our Cross Timbers Region, see the [Native Plant Database at the Lady Bird Johnson National Wildflower Center](#). Consult these lists when you visit garden nurseries and plant sales, and before you know it, you'll have a real wildlife haven.



"Queen butterflies (*Danaus gilippus*)", Anne Toal, CC BY 2.0.

Fall bloomers are in demand by butterflies, bees, and other pollinators, and don't necessarily get as much attention as the riot of spring color greeting us every year, so here are three that will make your yard come alive:

Blue Mistflower, *Eupatorium coelestinum*. This plant spreads nicely and blooms later in the summer and into fall, so it is an excellent nectar source for all those monarchs headed to Mexico for the winter, as well as other butterflies just looking for a reliable meal.

Gregg's Mistflower, *Conoclinium greggii*. This is a beautiful plant that blooms through most of the summer and provides many species with a nectar source through the dry months. Another plus is that the foliage is pretty – almost lime green with deep lobes in the leaves.

Fall Aster, *Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*. This fabulous plant blooms bright purple at the end of October so it is the perfect energy source for monarchs and other butterflies. Cut it back when it reaches about 10" tall in the spring, then every three weeks until August 1 to get a nice compact, dense showing of flowers.

If you have lost your roses to Rose-Rosette Disease, or your shrubs are looking sad, it's time to replace them. Like all living things, plants have a life expectancy, and too often, we refuse to admit our shrubs have exceeded theirs. Here are a few suggestions to help you get over the loss:

Autumn Sage, *Salvia greggii*. The darling of the landscaping industry is almost indestructible. It blooms from early spring until late in the winter providing a nectar source for all our pollinators and a wonderful shelter for tiny wildlife. It dies back when cold weather hits, but don't prune those dead plants – there are beneficial insects overwintering in there! Let them sleep until early to mid-March.

Coralberry, *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus*. This little shrub will bring a new texture to your garden with its small leaves and arching growth habit. The magenta berries in the winter are a good food source for birds and other wildlife, and their dense foliage and branching provide habitat year-round. While considered deciduous, in our area, it is evergreen most winters.

Cenizo, Texas Sage, *Leucophyllum frutescens*. This gorgeous shrub comes in both green- and silver-foliaged varieties and blooms almost anytime we have heavy humidity or rain. It provides cover for birds and creatures as well as nectar when blooming. This shrub is very easy to contain and requires minimal attention once established.



"Cenizo with Bee" by Gruenemann is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Now that we are ready to add some natives to our landscapes, there are a few things to keep in mind. Just because they are native doesn't mean they'll grow anywhere:

- Each plant still needs to be planted in the right spot to meet its sun/shade/water needs.
- Each plant still needs good sandy loam soil in which to grow, so we may need to amend our soil. Most conventional landscapes are on lots that were scraped clean of our rich prairie topsoil during construction, and it may or may not have been replaced to the depths needed.
- Natives require less water over their lifetime than other plants, but they still need regular watering during their first year while their roots are developing (two years for shrubs and three years for trees).
- Natives require less maintenance over time, but to keep our landscape clean and tidy and our neighbors happy, it is still important to prune correctly occasionally and to clean up the edges where these happy natives are spreading. This is your opportunity to share some plants with your friends and neighbors!

Enjoy your landscape and share it with wildlife. We can all have a real peek at the natural world right outside our door with just a few thoughtful plant selections and a little attention.

Resources:

[Native Plant Database](#), The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

[Native Host Plants for Texas Butterflies, A Field Guide](#), Wauer, Roland H.; Weber, Jim; and Weber, Lynne, College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2018

Native Habitat, [Earth-Kind](#), Texas AgriLife Extension Service

[Wildscapes](#), Texas Parks & Wildlife

[List of North Texas Native Plants](#), Native Plant Society of Texas, Trinity Forks Chapter

[Butterflies and Moths of North America](#). Lotts, Kelly and Thomas Naberhaus, coordinators (2021)