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Natives vs. Aliens

Written by Sandra Educate

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For decades, we have been instructed to follow the 'Right Plant-Right Place' mantra, but we've completely ignored this dictum when it comes to native plants. We should face the fact that native plants are not native to the average backyard. Sure, some of them will grow and thrive there, but they may not be the plants we want in our gardens. As garden writer Ed Koch says, "Never base a plant palette on what was native 200 years ago; base it on what the conditions are currently."

Yes, it's true that some native plants are more successful at sustaining animal and insect life than their alien counterparts, but that doesn't mean that non-natives are barren and beauty is their only purpose. They, too, provide wildlife habitat, need pollinating and go to seed. Aliens that grow here do so because our climate mimics theirs. The busiest plants in my garden are African Blue Basil and Mexican Sunflower (see above).

Only a few creatures have just one plant species as food; butterfly caterpillars (milkweed), pandas (bamboo) and koalas (eucalyptus) for example, but as long as the species is correct, the plant itself need not be a native. And even though I do have bamboo and eucalyptus in my garden, they haven't attracted any pandas or koalas. Yet.

I give almost half of my property to nature. There are probably some non-natives there, but wax myrtles especially, and water oaks, sweetgum, palmettos and pine trees have pretty much taken over that area, allowing only those pesky, aggressive vines like smilax, Virginia creeper, briar and grape to co-exist. Native plants can't legally be classified as invasive, but some are thugs and if I allowed it, they would take over my entire property. However, it's a good wildlife habitat so I leave it, even though the only color it offers seems to be green. The rest of my property is made of several garden beds, foundation shrubs, and trees. Turf, too, which I admit is a huge waste of resources; but that's another column.

For plants to earn space in my gardens, they must have color, texture, or fragrance, and encourage birds, butterflies and bees. Surely no one can disagree that there are more varieties of non-natives that fit those criteria than there are natives. After all, you have the whole world to choose from. I am an admitted plant nut so natives and aliens play happily together in my gardens.

I see articles that propose that there is a native alternative for every landscape option so there is no reason to plant aliens. However, the alternate options for the many, many non-natives available, seem to be for the *same few natives*. Refer to the Carolina Yards Plant Database. [h](#)

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<https://www.clemson.edu/extension/carolinayards/plant-database/index.html>

Looking there for a selection of foundation shrubs which are native, evergreen and with a maximum mature height under 6 to 8 feet (to avoid continual pruning), I found just one; *Ilex glabra* (I nkberry) – unless you consider palms and perennials to be foundation shrubs. Evidently they do, since they list plants such as *Salvia coccinea*, foam flower and false Solomon's seal as evergreen native shrubs.

The South Carolina Wildlife Foundation's list adds only one more; *Leucothoe axillaris*. <http://www.scwf.org/native-plant-list?rq=native%0plant%20list>

According to those lists, there just aren't enough native plants to fill landscape needs. And how are you supposed to know what *is* native?? I tried looking on the website of the South Carolina Native Plant Society but there is no list of common native plants. Curious. <https://scnps.org/>

But look at the number of non-native selections that fit that criteria. There are Gardenias, dwarf cultivars of Podocarpus, Pittosporum, Loropetalum, boxwood and hollies. *Pieris japonica*, *Abelia*, *Barberries*, *Fatsia*, *Dichroa*, *Serissa* and even some *Camellias*. Not a single one is invasive.

Oddly, growers don't seem to be very interested in cultivating dwarf versions of native plants. They should be; there is a need.

Introduced species have contributed greatly to the economy and beauty of our country. Our nation would be poorer indeed without the influx of non-native plant and animal life. Most of our animal protein; beef, pork, lamb, and chicken are not native to the United States. The vast majority of fruits and vegetables found in supermarkets today may grow here now, but they didn't originate here. The only native vegetables in cultivation were corn, squash and beans. American as apple pie? Nuh-uh. Asian. And while French Fries aren't native to France, they're not native here either. Most commonly used herbs and spices are non-native. And where would we be without our morning orange juice, toast (wheat) and coffee? Or the white wine of the

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south, iced tea? More non-natives.

Do you see where I'm going? If limiting our palette to natives applied to people, most of us wouldn't even be here today. Go back only a few generations, and other than Native Americans, we'd all be aliens.

Hello, Ork? Nanu-Nanu.