

The director of a native plant nursery discusses several Midwestern species that can grow and prosper in a formal landscape.

A Place for Native Plants

by MARK O'BRIEN

There are no straight lines in nature. We live in a world that fights against things that are wild, unorganized or chaotic. However, when it comes down to designing a sustainable landscape, we need to let loose and recognize that native plants — often referred to as wildflowers — have a place in our landscapes.

The terms “native” and “wild” go hand in hand. The terms “wild” and “formal” are at different ends of the spectrum. So, the challenge is to blend both worlds into something that provides the benefits of native plants and the structure required to please the most discerning clients. But which species will perform well enough to meet your clients’ expectations? In this article, I will identify native species from the Midwest that behave well in the structured landscape.

Defining native plants. Native plants are naturally occurring, indigenous plants within a specific habitat of a biogeographic region. Landscaping with native plants improves environmental biodiversity and stability. Native plants are hardy because they have adapted to the local conditions. Once established, native plants do not need pesticides or fertilizers and require little watering. Not only is this good for the environment, but it also saves time and money.

The benefits of using regional native species have been well-documented. These species have evolved in their environment and have adapted to the climate. They have become valuable parts of the food chain, providing habitats for insects and wildlife of the area. These are symbiotic relationships dependent on each other for survival. The effects of a diminished native plant community have a wide-reaching impact on the entire ecosystem. For this reason, it is important to find areas for native species to grow and prosper. But at the same time, the formal landscape is not the place for many of these species.

Landscaping with native plants improves environmental biodiversity and stability.

When choosing a native plant for the formal landscape, look for species offering stages of bloom time to keep the area interesting throughout the seasons. In the Midwest, spring bloomers, such as *Coreopsis lanceolata* (sand coreopsis), lead to the summer blooms of *Echinacea purpurea* (broad-leaved purple coneflower) and the fall color of *Aster*. Different textures can also provide interest in the form of grasses and foliage plants. It is important to select species requiring little maintenance. One myth about natives, which has been oversold, is that they don't require maintenance. All designed plantings require maintenance, with some requiring more than others.

Stay away from plants that aggressively spread by roots or seed. Species, such as *Heliopsis helianthoides* (false sunflower), *Monarda fistulosa* (wild bergamot), *Rudbeckia triloba* (brown-eyed Susan), *Silphium perfoliatum* (cup-plant), *Solidago altissima* (tall goldenrod), *S. canadensis* (Canada goldenrod) and *Spartina pectinata* (prairie cord grass), will quickly over-



Schizachyrium scoparium retains its rich bronze, fall color throughout the winter.



Koeleria pyramidata grows well in sand and retains a low profile with an early-summer bloom.

take a site. These species have their place in nature, but not in your garden beds. The standard practices of plant placement remain the same with taller species in the back. Also, be cognizant of your visual angles, and think about who is looking at this and from what perspective.

For the larger, open areas where you want to establish a prairie or grassland and still maintain a sense of order, keep a mowed edge to border the space. This will demonstrate a transitional space from one area to another and increase the aesthetic appeal. The client's perspective is key to the project's success. It is paramount that you listen to their ideas. Too many plantings have been removed or replanted because the finished product didn't match

what the client had envisioned. Replants can waste profits, delay payments and diminish customer satisfaction.

Native grasses. A handful of native grasses dominate the Great Plains of the central US. The following species are the most attractive of the Midwestern natives.

***Andropogon gerardii* (big bluestem):** The primary grass of the tallgrass prairie,

If you have the space and are looking for a good plant to use as a screen, *Andropogon gerardii* can be very effective.



More Midwestern natives for the formal landscape

<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>	Lavender hyssop
<i>Amorpha fruticosa</i>	Indigo bush
<i>Anemone cylindrica</i>	Thimbleweed
<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	Wild columbine
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	Sideoats grama
<i>Carex muskingumensis</i>	Swamp oval sedge
<i>Chelone glabra</i>	Turtlehead
<i>Dalea purpurea</i>	Purple prairie clover
<i>Echinacea pallida</i>	Pale purple coneflower
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Broad-leaved purple coneflower
<i>Helenium autumnale</i>	Sneezeweed
<i>Helianthus mollis</i>	Downy sunflower
<i>Heuchera richardsonii</i>	Prairie alum root
<i>Liatris aspera</i>	Rough blazing star
<i>Liatris pycnostachya</i>	Prairie blazing star
<i>Penstemon digitalis</i>	Foxglove beardtongue
<i>Solidago speciosa</i>	Showy goldenrod
<i>Veronicastrum virginicum</i>	Culver's root
<i>Zizia aurea</i>	Golden alexanders



Schizachyrium scoparium planted in mass has a year-round appeal.



Schizachyrium scoparium is a very attractive, clump-forming grass with a low profile up to 4 feet.

In the fall, shining, silver seed heads make *Schizachyrium scoparium* appear wave-like in the wind.



this impressive, 4- to 8-foot-tall, warm-season grass can be very effective as a screen. Make sure you have enough space to accommodate this deep-rooted plant, as it is very large and clump-forming. Two mature clumps will take up a space of 4 linear feet if planted side by side.

In late August, big bluestem will set its classic turkey foot seed head. Songbirds feed on the seed. Colorful in the fall, this plant will turn straw-colored in the winter. Big bluestem prefers dry to medium soils, but will grow in an array of soils. Because of its height, this species is better suited for areas away from shorter species and may not be ideal within a formal garden setting.

Panicum virgatum (switch grass) is often a better tallgrass option than big bluestem in a formal setting, as it maintains its form well throughout the winter. Except for the most western parts of the US, big bluestem can be found throughout the country. It is hardy in zones 3 to 5.

***Koeleria pyramidata* (June grass):** As the name implies, this low-profile, cool-season grass blooms between May and June, making it a nice option among its warm-season counterparts. Only growing to 2 feet tall, this slender grass has showy, white, spike-like panicles and ribbon-like leaves. Its low profile makes June grass a good choice for shorter plantings.

The plant prefers sandy, well-drained soils in full to partial sun. It can be very effective planted in mass and is a good choice for plantings in dunes or areas with rocky soils.

June grass spreads from seed and can be grown from seed or divisions. June grass is easy to transplant. It is found in most of the US except on the mid- to southern East Coast. June grass is hardy in zones 3 to 5.

***Schizachyrium scoparium* (little bluestem):** This classic prairie grass has everything you're looking for in a land-



During the summer, *Sporobolus heterolepis* has thin-bladed leaves and low-profile clumps before pushing up seed heads.



Fall clumps of *Sporobolus heterolepis* range in color from yellow to orange to red.



The frosted seed heads of *Sporobolus heterolepis* remain visible well into December.

scape plant. With a shorter profile of 4 feet, this clump-forming grass grows to 1 foot in diameter. The colors range from green to bluish green in the summer, turning a rich bronze with silver white seed heads in the fall. Little bluestem retains its rich color throughout the winter.

Preferring dry soils and full sun, this plant looks great alone or planted in mass. In larger plantings, solid stands of this plant can have great appeal. The waving action of little bluestem in the fall resem-

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Asclepias tuberosa will perform well in your landscape with reliable blooms and no overcrowding issues.



The long-lived perennial *Asclepias tuberosa* provides reliable, orange blooms season after season.

bles the movement of water. Because this plant retains that rich bronze color, it has appeal almost year-round.

Little bluestem will spread from seed and is easily transplanted. With excellent drought tolerance, this grass prefers soils with low fertility, but will grow in a wide range of conditions, from sand to garden soils. The seed are a welcome food source for songbirds. Little bluestem is hardy in zones 4 and 5.

Sporobolus heterolepis (prairie

dropseed): This outstanding performer is another clump-forming grass with a low profile. Prairie dropseed remains 1 to 1½ feet tall and is fountain-shaped before it sends up a thin seed head in the fall.

This regal-looking plant prefers dry to mesic soils in full sun to partially sunny areas. Prairie dropseed is tough and drought-tolerant. The late-summer blooms give off a pleasant, herb-like aroma. This plant will turn from shades of yellow to orange to red in the fall. The low

profile and fine-textured leaves make this grass a great choice for a front border. Plant 18 to 24 inches apart.

Prairie dropseed will add elegance to any planting, and the seed are rich in fat — thus treasured by birds. Spreading occurs by seed and is very limited. For best propagation results, use fresh seed. Prairie dropseed is hardy in zones 3 to 5.

Wildflowers. The following Midwestern native perennials will offer years of service with a minimum amount of care.

Asclepias tuberosa (butterfly milkweed): A wonderful plant deserving of space in any landscape, butterfly milkweed provides great color with large, or-



When choosing a native plant for the formal landscape, look for species offering stages of bloom time to keep the area interesting throughout the seasons.

ange blooms that attract butterflies and moths. Growing up to 2 feet tall, butterfly milkweed prefers dry soils and full sun, blooming from June to September. This deep-rooted, tuberous, perennial plant has a slow growth rate and returns year after year without crowding-out neighbors.

A favorite food plant of the caterpillar stage of the Monarch butterfly, this plant has a direct effect on the Monarch population. Drought-tolerant butterfly milkweed will not grow in poorly drained soils. For wet areas, *A. incarnata* (swamp milkweed) is a good alternate choice. Taller with pink blooms, swamp milkweed provides many of the same benefits. Because of its deep taproot, butterfly milkweed does not transplant well. Propagate from seed. Both species are hardy in zones 4 and 5.

***Baptisia australis* (blue wild indigo):** This deep-rooted and long-lived perennial is almost bush-like with attractive, blue-green leaflets. The foliage is reason

enough to grow this plant. Large, showy clusters of deep indigo-blue flowers will brighten up any landscape.

This slow-growing plant prefers average soil and will grow 3 to 5 feet tall. Full sun is required, as this plant is not shade-tolerant. Large, black seedpods add winter interest. Blue wild indigo blooms between May and June and will spread from seed, but is very slow to develop. Because it may reach 5 feet tall, you will want to be selective about placement.

Drought-tolerant due to its extensive root system, blue wild indigo shouldn't be disturbed once established. Foliage can be sheared after blooming to maintain its round shape and keep from staking. Propagate by stratifying the seed with sandpaper or hot water. Two other members of the *Baptisia* family to consider are *B. bracteata* (cream wild indigo) and *B. lactea* (white wild indigo). All species are hardy in zones 4 and 5.



Baptisia australis blooms are blue to complement its attractive, blue-green foliage.

***Eryngium yuccifolium* (rattlesnake-master):** An attractive perennial with an unusual, whitish, spiky, ball-shaped flower head, this plant grows to 3 to 5 feet

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Eryngium yuccifolium can be used as a specimen plant because of its unique flower tops and foliage.

Prairie dropseed will add elegance to any planting, and the seed are rich in fat — thus treasured by birds.

tall in medium soils and full sun. In shade conditions, rattlesnake-master can become spindly and require staking.

Consider this a foliage and specimen plant, and place it where its larger height won't overshadow smaller species. This unusual plant can also be featured in groupings. Growing with a single taproot, rattlesnake-master is drought-tolerant and difficult to transplant. The flower balls form between July and September and remain appealing for almost two months while attracting numerous pollinators. Propagate from seed. This plant is hardy in zones 4 and 5.

Filipendula rubra (queen of the prairie): Another plant that lives up to its name, queen of the prairie will steal the show. Blooming in midsummer with large plumes of brilliant pink flowers, this perennial species will reach 3 to 6 feet tall.

Queen of the prairie will spread from rhizomes to form large clumps. The base plant remains close to the ground with attractive foliage before sending up its flower spikes in summer. Because of its 6-inch-tall, ridged flower spikes, it should be considered for a back border.



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Fillipendula rubra blooms on rigid stalks stand out in any setting.



Fillipendula rubra lives up to its reputation as one of our most attractive native wildflowers.

This plant grows best in rich, moist soils and does not tolerate drought or high heat. Partial shade is welcomed in hot climates. The bloom time for queen of the prairie is short at two weeks. The plant does best in the cooler Midwestern climates. It can be grown from seed or divisions in the spring. Queen of the prairie is hardy in zones 4 and 5.

These species can be mixed in with other non-native or selected landscape plants. It's important to note that care should be taken when choosing species that are not native to the planting area. Look for noninvasive species that won't pose a threat to the native ecosystem. Your local department of natural resources should have a list of invasive plants in your area.

Use as many native plants as possible, and support your local growers. Doing so will help reduce your carbon footprint while supporting biodiversity. Education will play a large role in forging the sustainable landscapes of the future.

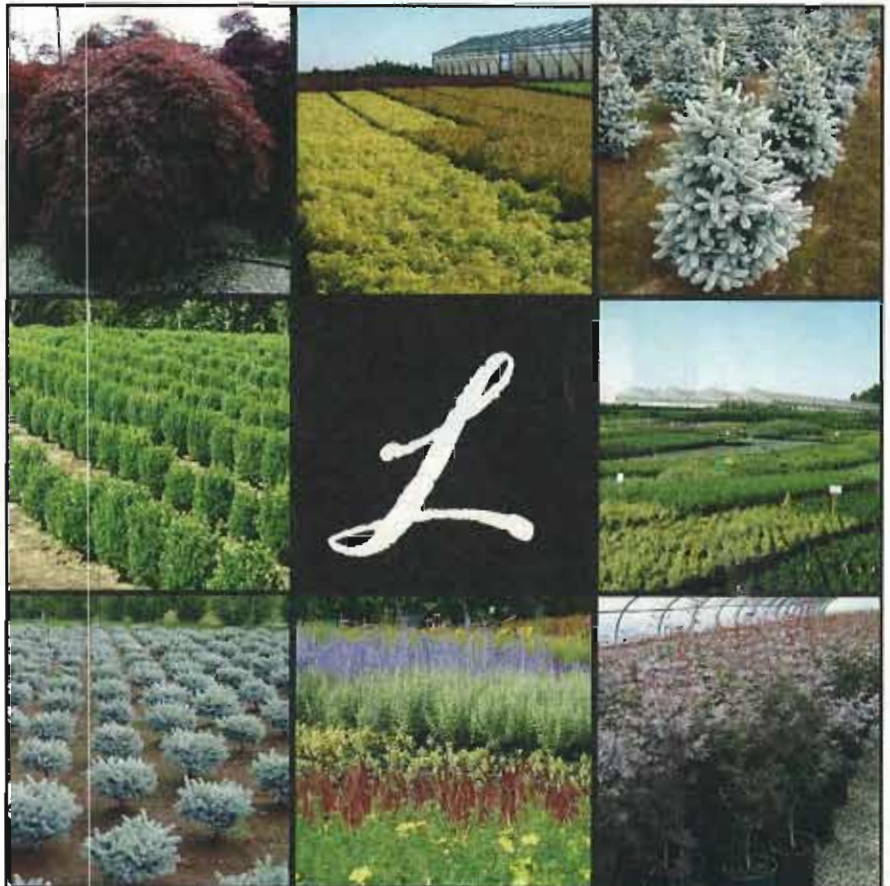
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