

## OOPS, THAT'S NOT A NATIVE PLANT!

Many gardeners are surprised to discover that a “native” plant in their garden is not native to New York State and cannot be included on the Pollinator-Friendly Garden application. They may ask, why isn't my plant considered to be native? There are several explanations.

First of all, it is entirely possible that this "native" plant was purchased at a reputable garden center from the native plant section. Many growers commonly define being "native" as meaning that the ancestors of this plant originated somewhere in North America. Our large continent has many different environments and climate zones; so, for example, a plant that normally grows in a western prairie may not be suitable for the growing conditions of New York. More importantly, that plant's pollen or nectar may not contain the essential nutrients required by our NY native pollinator species. Also, our local butterflies and moths often need very specific host plants on which to lay their eggs.

Before you go shopping for plants, it may be useful to make a list of NY native plants you would like to add to your garden plan. The New York Flora Atlas (<https://newyork.plantatlas.usf.edu/>) is the definitive source for what plants are native in our state. It is an accessible data base that helps you look up a plant by either common name or botanical name. Plant labels can be misleading, so if in doubt, check out this website.

There are a few non-NY native exceptions in the list for the Pollinator-Friendly Garden program. All of them are from nearby eastern US states, usually including Pennsylvania. Some of these plants, such as *Echinacea purpurea* and *Penstemon digitalis*, are naturalized in New York. This means that, although they are not native, they are now widespread in the wild across the state. Their success in growing and self-seeding throughout the state demonstrates that our local pollinators find them attractive.

Another reason that a "native" plant in your garden might not be considered New York native is because it is a hybrid. For example, there are many hybrids available for both *Echinacea* and *Helenium*. When plant breeders develop hybrids, their focus is usually on creating plants that are attractive to gardeners – double petaled flowers, new colors, unusual flower shapes, etc. These variations often result in pretty flowers with less nectar and pollen – or sometimes, none at all. Therefore, all hybrids are excluded from the Pollinator-Friendly Garden native plant list. When buying plants, be sure to read the labels carefully.

A hybrid is different from a nativar, which is a naturally occurring variety of a native plant that is now propagated commercially. In some cases, the original variety found in nature has been further refined through selective breeding to enhance a particular trait, such as variegated foliage. There is ongoing debate on whether nativars are beneficial to pollinators and other wildlife, which often relates to the specific plant species and adaptability of the animals that depend on that plant. Some studies have shown equal, or in a few instances, improved benefit while other studies have shown decreased benefits. For example, nativars of *Hydrangea arborescens* with mophead flowers were found to attract far fewer pollinators than nativars with lacecap flowers. Nativars are currently acceptable for inclusion when applying for Pollinator-Friendly Garden certification. When there is a choice, it is always preferable to use native species rather than nativars.

Our New York native bees, butterflies, wasps, and other pollinators depend on reliable, nutritious sources of food for themselves and their young from early spring until autumn frost. Some pollinators are specialists, like Monarch butterflies, that rely on one particular family, genus or species of plants and can live and produce offspring only if those plants are present. Other pollinators, like bumble bees, are generalists and have some flexibility in selecting flowers to feed on but can discriminate between low and high quality pollen. To optimally serve the needs of all of these types of pollinators, it is best to grow a diverse range of NY native plants in your garden.