

What Is a Cultivar? A Nativar? A Native?

by Lyn Chimera and Carol Ann Harlos

Summer is for gardening but buying plants can be confusing. So much has been written about gardening to help nature and pollinators. Many people are now looking to add native plants to their garden. But there are natives, cultivars and nativars available. Oh my! The following are some clarifications of the terminology you will encounter to help you make wise decisions.

A **native plant** is one that has evolved in an ecosystem over time. This is important for plants because this allows plant species to grow and adapt to a certain environment. This also means that the insects that have evolved along with the plants may function as their pollinators or eat them! This also means the insects that have evolved along with the plants cannot eat all of them or there will be no plants for them in the future! How does this all work out? Plants defend against insects by altering their chemical makeup. Thus plants and insects that are native have adapted to each other over time.

The popularity of natives has led some growers to develop natives with different characteristics such as height, color, or disease resistance. These are often referred to as “**nativars**” which simply means a cultivar of a native.

A **cultivar** is a plant that has been intentionally bred or selected and is maintained by grafting or by cuttings. Cultivars are clones. Humans have been selectively breeding plants or making cuttings for a long time!

Let's take a look at one species. The “native” cone flower, *Echinacea purpurea*, is not native to our area but native from Ohio south to Louisiana and Georgia but is commonly grown in our area. There are many Echinaceae cultivars, however. If you see an extra word after the genus and species name usually in quotation marks and in English, like *Echinacea purpurea*, ‘Cheyenne Spirit’ it means it's a cultivar/nativar.

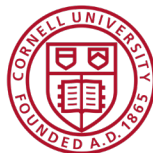
Should you grow native species in your garden? Of course! Growing native species provides benefits for the plant community and for wildlife. If you choose native species that are appropriate for your area they can provide food for birds, nectar for butterflies, seeds for squirrels. In addition, a native garden requires less maintenance!

However, it's usually difficult to find the true species (that is the native species) in garden centers. Growers like ‘Proven Winners’ use tissue culture to reproduce their cultivars/nativars. (It takes about ten years to develop a new plant!) Some cultivars are sterile or partially sterile. If a cultivar does make seed, the offspring usually don't breed true. Hybridizers have developed many cultivars of Echinacea some of which have little food value for pollinators. There are many cultivars including ones with double flowers and unusual colors. However the seeds of many Echinacea revert to the native colors and flowerheads of the native species (much to the chagrin of some gardeners!)

This subject is not simple because it is now complicated by climate change. This means that some natives may do better in new locations! It also means that insects which evolved along with the original natives may not evolve along with them! A complicated situation!

What to do? Gardeners should make decisions regarding their purchases based on the best knowledge that is available.

Bottom line: if you want to support nature look for native species. Read those plant tags. Make researched backed choices. For example, Monarda ‘Jacobs Cline,’ which is a cultivar, performs as well as the native species. If the nursery only has cultivars/nativars encourage them to offer the species. When enough people ask the nurseries will respond. Luckily, there are many more independent nurseries selling true natives in our area.



Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for providing equal program and employment opportunities in accordance with applicable laws.

© Copyright 2026 All Rights Reserved