Audubon International

Fact Sheet

Working Within Your Ecological Region

What makes one forest different from another? Variations in landforms, climate, terrain, plants, and wildlife give each region its distinct character. Landscaping with plants that are native to your region contributes to the natural heritage of the place you live.

Ecologists divide North America into ecological regions, or eco-regions. Unlike political boundaries, eco-regions are defined by natural features, such as geologic history, soils, landforms, topography, vegetation, and climate. Within each broad eco-region are distinct plant communities that give each part of the country its unique natural character. Though boundaries between plant communities grade into each other, characteristic trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, and wetland species emerge to define the landscape.

When you landscape with plants that are characteristic of your ecological region, you help to preserve not only the unique local character of your area, but the overall biological diversity of North America. Working with the natural characteristics of your region has far-reaching environmental benefits:

- Conserves and restores the biological diversity of plants and animals
- Improves water quality
- Lowers maintenance costs and reduces the need for high-intensity maintenance activities
- Creates a healthier, more sustainable mosaic of land uses on the landscape
- Supports an aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty
- Creates positive, progressive, and constructive attitudes about the natural world

Getting Started

As you create your environmental plan and begin landscaping projects, one of the areas you'll focus on is Wildlife Habitat Management. By striving to landscape with native vegetation unique to your eco-region and local plant community, you'll achieve the best results for people, wildlife, and the environment.

1. Set a goal. We suggest striving to maintain at least 80% of your landscape with native vegetation—trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses, etc. that are indigenous to your eco-region. Your current landscape, property aesthetic, and budget will help you determine a goal that's right for you.

2. Identify and learn about your local eco-region and native plant community. Within each eco-region are distinct plant communities. For instance, the Tallgrass Prairie/Great Plains region includes Oak-Hickory forest, Maple-Basswood forest, Bluestem Prairie, Oak Savanna, Beech-Maple forest, and Elm-Ash forest. Each plant community has characteristic species that predominate, as well as associated species commonly found within the plant community. What trees dominate your site? Depending on the history of land use on your property, you may need to visit nearby natural areas to determine what species naturally predominate.

Native plant berm at The Landings Club, Marshwood Golf Course in Savannah, Georgia. Photo: Fitz Clarke.

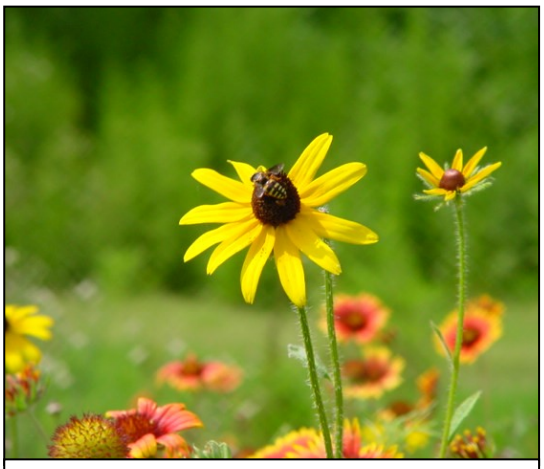
3. Consult regional native plant lists when choosing trees, shrubs, flowers and other landscape vegetation. When you joined Audubon International, one of your new member benefits was a plant list that included trees, shrubs, and herbaceous species characteristic of plant communities in your eco-region. Use this plant list as a reference when you landscape. If you need another copy, please call us.

4. Identify nursery sources for native plants. Not all nurseries sell native plants, though many carry the most common varieties. For instance, you can easily order a non-native Bradford pear tree or crabapple from just about any mail order or local nursery. They may also carry native tree options. You may have to seek out nurseries that specialize in native plants to find certain species, especially shrubs and wildflowers unique to your region. Ask your nursery supplier whether they carry native plants, and share your plant list with them when making purchases. Also keep in mind that nursery stock grown in your area will tend to be better adapted to local growing conditions.

5. Establish native plants. You can plant native species in flower gardens, habitat areas, landscape areas around buildings, entry roads, or property borders. These plants will be well adapted to local climate and soils and will provide good sources of food and cover for wildlife. Keep in mind that while native species are extremely hardy and will eventually thrive without inputs at all, they do benefit and establish faster with some site preparation and post-planting care. Mulching, weed barriers, and supplemental irrigation will help your plants get off to a good start.

6. Remove exotic invasive species. Some properties suffer from invasive plants that have crowded out native plant communities. Kudzu, purple loosestrife, Japanese honeysuckle, and *Melaleuca spp.* are just a few common examples of invasive exotic plants that overwhelm native plants. If you have exotic invasive plants on your property, plan to cut them back or eliminate them as part of your habitat management plan.

7. Protect existing native plants, especially threatened or endangered species. Plants such as mature trees, native wildflowers, prairie grasses, or desert cactus can define a property and are difficult and costly to replace. Take good care of existing native plants and protect them from disturbances such as careless maintenance, pollution, vandalism, or recreational activities.



Rudbeckia and other wildflowers at Kingwood Country Club in Texas. Rudbeckia, commonly known as Black-eyed-susans, are native to North America.

Useful Web Sites

- Prairie Nursery (native plants and seeds wholesale catalog): https://www.prairienursery.com/.
- EPA—Landscaping with Native Plants: https://archive.epa.gov/greenacres/
- U.S. Department of Agriculture plant database: http://plants.usda.gov/
- Many state native plant society sites are available. Go to your search engine and type in the key words *native plants* and your *state*.