

Native versus nonnative plants

There seems to be an increased interest in native landscape plants. But just because a plant is native doesn't mean it's foolproof. And not all nonnative plants are all bad.

A misplaced native plant may not perform well despite the fact it is native. For example, many native plants have low salt tolerance. These low salt-tolerant plants would be doomed for failure when planted too close to the gulf, exposed to salt spray from the ocean.

Some native willows live short lives when planted on well-drained, dry sandy sites. Certain native shade-loving plants, such as the sword fern, suffer when planted in full sun. Knowing the preferences of the plant and planting the right plant in the right place are critical factors in having success with native plants.

There are many nonnative plants that have proven themselves over the years. The Southeast would not be the same aesthetically or economically in the absence of certain foreign plants. Removing those plants that are not indigenous results in the elimination of the citrus industry in Florida (a multi-million dollar industry). It does away with most vegetables. Tomato production alone brings in close to \$600 million to Florida's economy per year. There would be no golf courses, football fields, baseball fields, etc. There would be no home lawns (some may applaud here). Bahiagrass, bermudagrass, carpetgrass, centipedegrass St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass were originally brought to the United States from foreign countries. Who would give up camellias, evergreen azaleas or crape myrtles, all of which are native to Asia?

Sure, there are exotic plants that have become invasive. Plants such as Chinese tallow (popcorn tree), kudzu and even some types of wisteria have become major weeds in parts of the Gulf Coast. There are laws which prohibit the use of certain exotic, invasive plant species.

There also are native plants which can be unruly in our landscapes. Florida betony (rattlesnake weed), smilax (greenbrier), nutsedge (nutgrass), yaupon holly and common persimmon are only a few examples of native plants that can get out of control.

I do encourage the preservation of native plants. Ecological preservation is an outstanding reason to consider using native plants. With the increasing destruction of natural environments for urban and agricultural use, many native plant species have declined in numbers and range.

As the Gulf Coast area continues to grow in population, we need to put careful thought into the way we are developing our landscapes. We need to consider the great wealth of native plants with which we are blessed. But we also should recognize and appreciate the contributions of many nonnative plants to our landscapes and gardens.

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