

## Cover Story

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# Natives for All Regions & Seasons

*Matthew Olson*

For many consumers, a trip to the garden center means finding plants that will deliver with multiple seasons of interest. And that's not all. Shoppers are becoming more conscious of how they spend their money, making it crucial to grab their attention and show the benefits of native species for their gardens.

As we highlight these plants to customers, we can expand their palette and show them the vast network of natives available to enhance their landscapes. For those of you looking to expand your native offerings, here are some great options for different regions of the country.

## The Midwest and Northeast

This part of North America is abundant with natives that perform in the landscape and look good in retail. Ryan McEnaney, Marketing & Communications Manager at Bailey Nurseries, shares a few selections that have stood out for him, including First Editions Iceberg Alley Sageleaf Willow.

"This shrub was discovered in Canada and has unique silver foliage that adds texture and contrast on the sales floor and in landscapes," Ryan said. "It's extremely hardy and retains a rounded habit, allowing you to mix with other plants in the garden." Iceberg Alley thrives in moist soil and is excellent for rain gardens.



*Pictured: First Editions Jade Parade Sand Cherry*

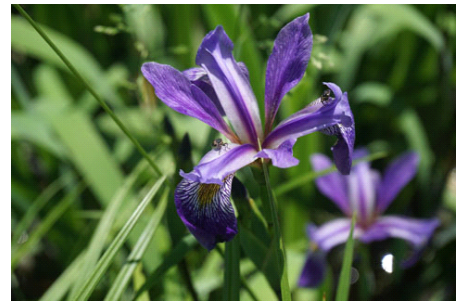
Another favorite of Ryan's is a low-growing shrub called First Editions Jade Parade Sand Cherry. He added, "Jade Parade is hard to miss with its profusion of white spring blooms that cover the branches and provide nectar for pollinators. And in fall, the blue-green foliage transforms into shades of yellow, orange and red."

This drought-tolerant selection has an upright, spreading growth habit and is excellent for mass plantings. In addition, it offers a fresh alternative to common groundcovers.

Foliage is a vital part of achieving multi-season interest, especially for perennials. I spoke with Steve Castorani, the president of North Creek Nurseries in Pennsylvania (and co-founder of the American Beauties lineup of native plants), to learn about some of his top choices for herbaceous plants.

*Pictured: Iris versicolor Purple Flame*

Most of us are familiar with iris and their different species, but one selection from the Mt. Cuba Center shines with unique foliage, Iris versicolor Purple Flame. Steve said, “The outstanding feature of this iris is the deep maroon-purple new growth that emerges in spring and remains that color for about four or five weeks before maturing to green. It also has a dark lavender flower lasting two to three weeks, so you’re looking at six to seven weeks of interest.” And like many irises, it forms clumps and makes a great utility plant for moist areas and rain gardens.



*Veronii lettermanii* Iron Butterfly (Ironweed) is a perennial that combines fine foliage with fall blooms. Steve shared what makes this plant special: “It has a wispy, dense foliage that is very fine, which adds a lot of texture and movement, especially in the breeze. And then in late summer, it’ll bloom for about four to six weeks. I’ve had professionals say it looks just like amsonia.”



*Pictured: Veronii lettermanii Iron Butterfly*

The small purple flowers provide late-season nectar for pollinators like bees, butterflies and moths. And the plant continues looking good right into winter. He noted, “It retains those seed heads into winter, so you have late-season interest. And even though it’s brown, it still has a lot of attraction in the fall and winter landscape.” This prairie species does well in dry to medium moisture and is a perfect choice for combining with other plants.

## South Central and Southeast

From Texas to Florida there’s no shortage of native options, but getting consumers to grow them is a challenge. Marta Lafaver, Garden Center Manager at Buchanan’s Native Plants in Houston, shared some of her favorite plants to get their foot in the door.

“In Texas, there is one that I like to ease people into the world of natives and that is Texas Rock Rose. It’s a beautiful shrub with showy pink flowers. It doesn’t look like a native, but it has all the great attributes of a native that can take a lot of different conditions, like drought, full sun or part shade. It’s a super high nectar source for pollinators and we sell a ton of these when we put it with our pollinator table.”

This plant is ideal for xeriscapes, rock gardens and mixed borders. While it thrives as a small shrub in USDA Zones 9 to 13, it also does well as an herbaceous perennial in Zones 7 and 8.

Shrub dogwoods are known for their winter interest in the north, but the roughleaf dogwood is an excellent choice for southern gardeners.

“Roughleaf dogwoods are a great winter interest tree because they’re a significant winter food source for over 40 different species of birds,” Marta said. “It has white flowers, beautiful berries, fall foliage and the branches turn red, so it’s an interesting color change.”

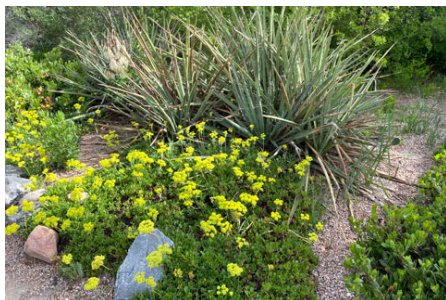
She added they don’t carry many dogwoods, but this one does well for them. “This is one of the only dogwoods that we carry because it doesn’t split like some of the other dogwoods.” This species grows up to 20-ft. tall and can be found from Texas to Georgia and colder parts of the eastern U.S.

For gardeners looking to fill a large gap in their landscape, the nuttall oak (*Quercus texana*) is one of the best trees for fall color in the deep south. Marta added, “We don’t get pretty fall color like you have up north, but this tree is like

the equivalent of a maple for fall color. It's a great root plant that tolerates our clay soils and helps break up the soil to allow other plants to grow underneath, making it a great companion plant."

## Mountain West and Great Plains

Our final group of plants come from the dry regions of Colorado and the Mountain West. Grace Johnson, Assistant Manager of Horticulture for the Denver Botanical Garden in Chatfield, shared a few of her favorites for the area.



*Pictured: Kannah Creek Sulphur Buckwheat*

"The first one that came to mind for me is a wonderful and easy plant to grow called Kannah Creek Sulphur Buckwheat (*Eriogonum umbellatum*)," Grace said. "This perennial has bright yellow flowers in early summer, then the seed heads turn a coppery color. Once the seed heads are spent and you deadhead it down just to its foliage, it has almost a dark red to purple foliage color in winter." The plant remains small and compact, making it useful in landscapes with limited space, and it does well in a xeriscape or

border edge.

Another perennial to consider is Baby Blue Rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus* var. *nauseosus*), which has blue needle-like foliage and cheerful yellow blooms in late summer. The end-of-season flowers are fantastic for attracting butterflies and other pollinators. Like Kannah Creek, the only required maintenance is an annual spring cutback.

In the landscape, Baby Blue is a perfect companion plant for other xeriscape species, like our next plant, Blonde Ambition grama grass. This Great Plains native remains under 36-in. tall and has unique seedheads that resemble flags. Like many ornamental grasses, the leaves add beautiful texture and structure to any landscape, especially in winter. It prefers soil with less fertility and moisture, making it easy to grow in the Great Plains and other dry regions.

One genus that continues to stand out for Grace is penstemon. "We have so many native penstemons, and I've had great luck with *Penstemon strictus*, *Penstemon grandiflorus* and *Penstemon pinifolius*. Those are three of my favorite Colorado native penstemons. And the *Penstemon grandiflorus* has such unique foliage. The foliage resembles honeysuckle leaves and there can be some color variation in the flowers."

*Pictured: Penstemon strictus*

Certain natives can be hard to supply for retailers and Grace encouraged us to keep educating consumers about native species.

"I think the more we promote them and get the word out about them—and consumers start demanding them—hopefully, their availability will be better," she added.

And remember, some of the benefits to selling these plants are the solutions they provide for our customers. **GP**



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