

## Features

12/1/2023

## Following the Data

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In the U.S., native plants are defined as being present prior to European settlement and “have evolved and occur naturally in a particular region, ecosystem and habitat” (U.S. Forest Service, 2023). As a result, native plants are often associated with numerous ecological and production benefits, including reduced inputs (fertilizer, irrigation, pesticides), improved biodiversity, increased pollinator foraging and habitat sources, and so forth. When considering the ornamental plant market, native plant sales have increased in the past years. Consumers are actively seeking native plants in the garden center and will drive greater distances to shop at native plant retailers.

*Pictured: Example of in-store signage identifying a native host plant and pollinators benefiting from the plant.*

What makes these products so interesting to customers? In 2022, we addressed this question using an online survey of 2,066 U.S. consumers. Fifty-eight percent of the sample had purchased native plants in the previous year, 25% had not and 17% didn’t know if they’d purchased native plants. From this research, we identified three key takeaway messages to help the industry understand the native plant movement from the consumer perspective.

### No. 1: Seeking Natives at Specialty Stores

Consumers are actively seeking native plants using different retail outlets than those traditionally used by gardeners. Historically, home improvement centers have dominated the ornamental plant retail market, followed by mass merchandisers, garden centers and hardware stores (Whiting and Cohen, 2021). These are still the primary outlets supplying ornamental plants in general. However, when purchasing native plants, participants indicated they frequent stores that specialize in ornamental plant sales. Specifically, they seek native plants at single-location retail garden centers the most, followed by directly from nurseries or greenhouses, home improvement centers, multiple-location garden centers and then mass merchandisers (Figure 1).

These findings suggest that consumers view native plants as niche products, and they believe they need to visit specialty stores to find natives and have a wider selection of native plants. This is consistent with industry trends that have identified an uptick in sales from these outlets relative to years past (Whiting and Cohen, 2021).

## **No. 2: Ecological and Aesthetic Benefits Motivate Native Plant Sales**

U.S. consumer motivations for purchasing native plants are primarily driven by perceived ecological benefits and aesthetic preferences (Figure 2). The largest portion of the sample indicated that benefiting pollinators was the primary reason they purchased native plants.

For several years, consumers have identified pollinator-friendly promotions as one of the top important benefits of plants (behind aesthetics and quality) that influence their purchasing behavior. Point-of-sale information (e.g., signs, labels, logos) identifying those plants that benefit pollinators can direct customers to plants that meet their needs and boost sales, especially of native plants.

The next most frequent motivation was complementing previous plantings/gardens, followed by natural habitat restoration, aesthetics and wildlife benefits. Motivations that were selected less frequently were related to marketing (recommendations, availability, media exposure, social media) and solving problem areas in the landscape (water gardens, difficult planting sites).

## **No. 3: Environmentally Friendly Gardening Practices**

Given the ecological motivations underlying many native plant purchases, it's not surprising that people who view native plants as important also participate in more environmentally friendly gardening practices. About 50% of the marketplace view native plants as important, 33% view them as moderately important and the remaining 17% view them as not important (native plant importance segments).

When evaluating 11 different gardening practices, respondents indicated they participated in recycling gardening packaging the most often, followed by using pollinator-friendly plants, planting varieties that require less fertilizer or pesticides, using native plants, using soil amendments, planting varieties that require less water, and growing some of their own food (Figure 3). Organic practices and plants, composting, and collecting rainwater were used by some participants, but not as many as the other practices.

When considering eco-friendly practices across the three native plant importance segments (very important, moderately important, not important), individuals that considered native plants as important participated in eco-friendly practices significantly more than those in either of the other two groups. These individuals also valued pollinator-friendly plants the highest, followed by using native plants, recycling, using plant varieties requiring less fertilizer or pesticides, using plant varieties requiring less water, and then soil amendments. The moderately important segment valued recycling the highest, followed by pollinator-friendly plants, plant varieties requiring less fertilizer or pesticides, and using soil amendments. Lastly, the not-important segment rated recycling the highest, followed by plant varieties requiring less fertilizer or pesticides, pollinator-friendly plants, soil amendments and then varieties requiring less water.

## **Study Takeaways**

Moving forward, as consumers decide to spend their money on items they consider sustainable (including plants), focusing on emphasizing production methods and products that meet those needs will be increasingly important when developing marketing strategies to sell native plants. There's also an opportunity to increase traffic to retail garden centers through promoting the availability of native plants to the end consumer. Native plants are one product line customers are interested in and may want more information about. When marketing native plants, their use of eco-friendly practices can be used to align with customer needs, encourage engagement and drive sales. Based on these findings, practical applications include:

- Continue promoting the retail garden centers' locations and available plants to improve customer awareness of the business and offerings.

- Use the retailer's online presence (e.g., social media, websites) to highlight native plant offerings.
- Highlight ecological benefits of native plants using point-of-sale information.
- Plants that benefit pollinators are hot among customers across the market. Indicate plants that benefit the adult pollinators, as well as the larvae and how they benefit pollinators (e.g., food, habitat, host species).
- Consumers are interested in restoring natural environments and aiding wildlife. Highlight plants that can aid them in reaching these goals.
- Provide examples demonstrating the plant's aesthetic benefits. The mature plant will look different from the younger plant they're buying in the retail store. Use photos of mature, flowering or fruiting native plants on signs and labels to show consumers what they'll look like.
- Have demonstrations throughout the retail establishment highlighting different uses (e.g., in the landscape/garden, in containers).
- Organize plants to show how they can appear in mixed plantings to emphasize the aesthetic characteristics.
- Describe additional aesthetic benefits (e.g., winter interest, fall color, flower color) that the consumer may be unaware of at the retail center. Provide pictures where possible.

Align in-store offerings and product information related to environmentally friendly gardening practices and the native plants to leverage existing customers' interests to encourage additional sales. **GP**

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*References: Whiting, D. and P. Cohen. 2021. National Gardening Survey 2021 Edition: A Comprehensive Study of Consumer Gardening Practices, Trends, and Product Sales. National Gardening Association. U.S. Forest Service. 2023. What Are Native Plant Materials? Available online at [fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/Native\\_Plant\\_Materials/whatare.shtml](https://fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/Native_Plant_Materials/whatare.shtml), accessed August 20, 2023.*

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*Acknowledgements: Funding for the project was provided by the Horticulture Research Institute (HRI). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of HRI.*

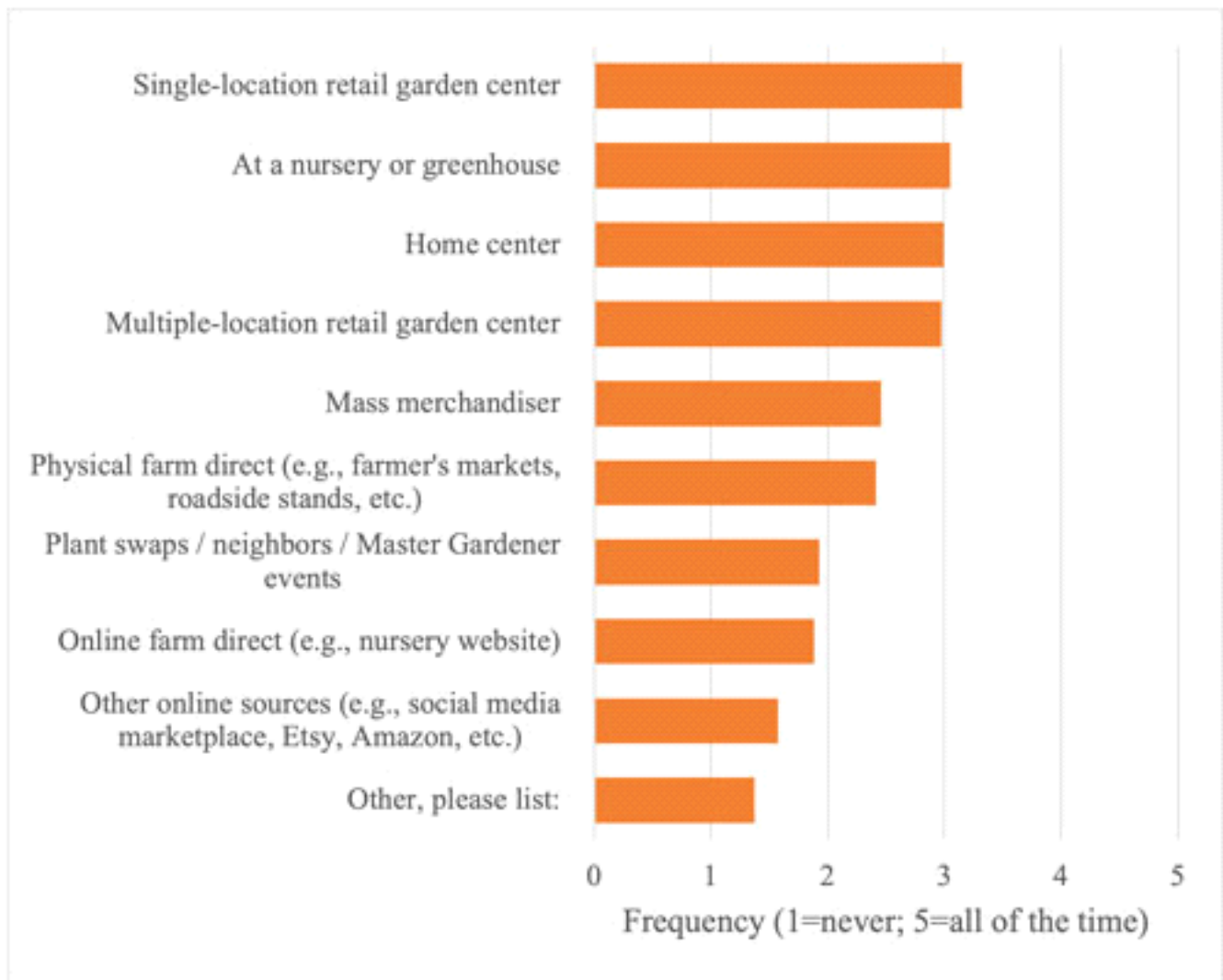


Figure 1. U.S. consumers' frequency of native plant purchases by retail type ( $n = 2,066$ ).

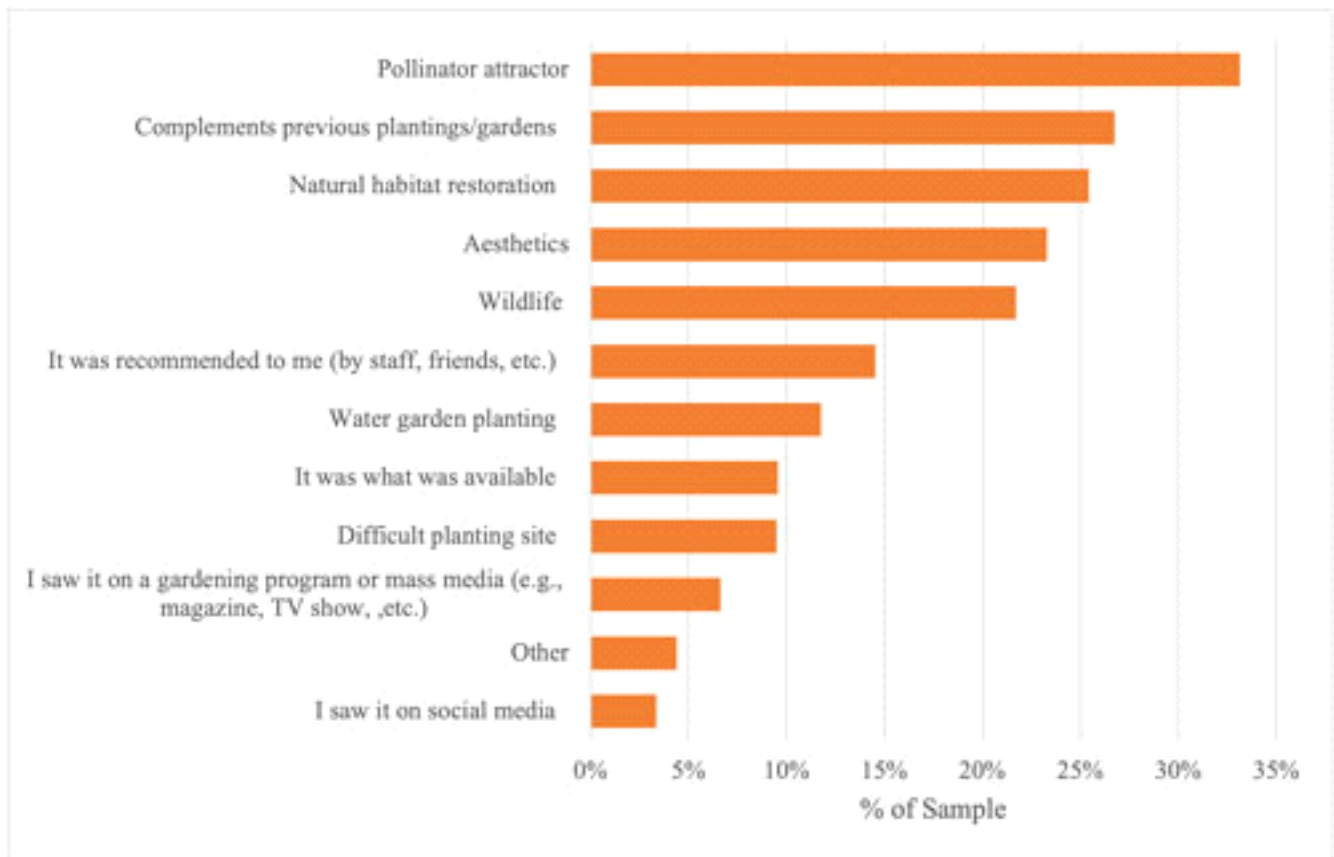


Figure 2. Motivations driving U.S. consumers to purchase native plants in 2022 ( $n = 2,066$ ).

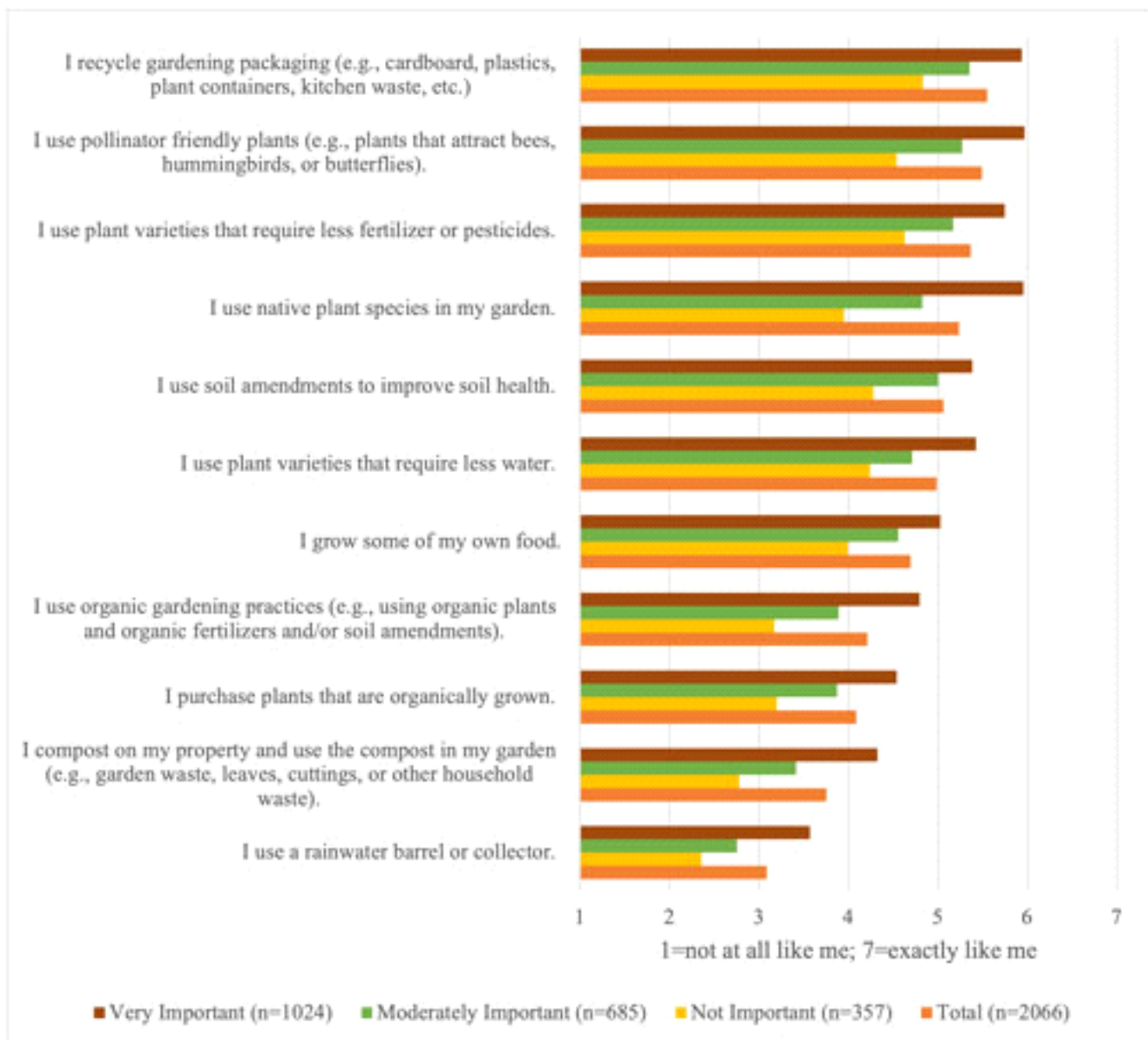


Figure 3. Environmentally friendly gardening practices used by participants by native plant importance group (n = 2,066).