

A Rant about Native Plants

By Larry the Garden Geezer

In the Great Northwest we are blessed with a great many beautiful native plants. In all the spare time I had before I had a nursery to support, Bethany and I spent a lot of pleasant time exploring Northwest woods and mountains looking for plants armed only with a shovel and a permit from the U.S. Forest Service.

In the wild, many native plants are abundant and some are very rare. It goes without saying (but I will anyway) that rare plants should be left alone in the wild. Usually their growing conditions are so specific that they would fail in your garden anyway. Otherwise, they would not be rare! There are specialty nurseries that offer nursery grown rare plants from nursery grown seed. They should be your source for rare plants rather than collecting them in the wild. Such nurseries can also provide growing information for these picky plants. For the more abundant plants, personal use permits can be obtained from local U.S. Forest Service Offices. Collecting in the fall after early frosts has worked best for me.

There is a growing interest in landscaping with native plants because of their supposed adaptation to local conditions. I don't claim to be an expert on the subject, but my experience with native plant gardening suggests that some like it in my garden and some don't. What follows is a discussion of some of my successes with natives. As you might expect, I quickly gloss over my failures!

Lael's Moon Garden offers most of the native plants discussed (positively) below. We get them nursery-grown or from professional diggers with collecting permits.



Mountain Hemlock pictured

Alpine Firs (*Abies lasiocarpa*), Murrayana Pines (*Pinus contorta* subsp. *murrayana*) and Mountain Hemlocks (*Tsuga mertensiana*) All of these conifers grow well if provided with sun and excellent drainage. They grow very slowly and customers love them because they are frequently twisted and contorted by the snow and wind at the altitudes where they are native. A word of warning—they are used to rough conditions. Once they are established (after two summers) do not give them fertilizer or too much water. That will make them grow too fast and they will lose their 'cool' alpine shape. All of them make excellent container plants which helps to keep them small and looking cool.





Flowering Currants (*Ribes sanguineum*)

I have seen these bird-friendly plants growing wild in the Cascades and growing equally well in the lowlands around Longview. There are lots of them in Capital Forest. They like sun and good drainage. In the garden, they benefit from cutting back when young. This causes them to branch. Each branch has flowers all along it. Hummingbirds like the flowers and other birds love the small blue berries that form later. Wild plants vary a lot in flower color, from sickly pink

to stronger pink. We offer only nursery-grown varieties selected for strong color: King Edward VII and Pullborough Scarlet.

Evergreen Huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*)

This is a widely distributed evergreen understory plant west of the Cascades. The foliage is beautiful and the new growth is pinkish red. The flowers are small and white and the berries are almost black. It's a great bird plant for shade or dappled shade with continuous moisture and loose soil with lots of humus. The pointed foliage is shiny dark green. We offer this plant nursery grown in containers and currently have a few larger collected ones.



Red Huckleberry (*Vaccinium parvifolium*)

This one has bright green stems and deciduous leaves that have nice summer and fall color. It likes part sun and good drainage. In the wild it is often seen growing on top of large rotted stumps. Once established, it will stand full sun, but that isn't its favorite site. The berries are bright red and tasty, but tart. Birds don't care, they love them!

Bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) This is a ground cover for dappled shade. It likes woodland soil with a lot of humus. The roots are shallow and grow in 4"-6" of moist garden mulch in our garden. The plant is actually a type of dogwood with small white flowers reminiscent of an eastern dogwood. It forms clusters of bright red BB-sized berries in late summer and fall—beautiful bird food!





Weeping Alaska Cedars: (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*) These conifers are native to the Cascades, but they grow very well at lower elevations as well. They typically have a strong central leader with steeply weeping graceful branches. In the wild they frequently have multiple trunks, while nursery grown plants are usually kept to a single trunk. In landscapes, these beautiful trees usually top out around 30' but are typically only 6'-7' wide at the base and much narrower at the top. There are also some beautiful varieties selected from this species, notably "Green Arrow" selected for its dark blue-green color and very narrow habit. We offer nursery-grown plants of several varieties.

Pacific Wax Myrtle (*Myrica californica* or *Morella californica*) This large evergreen shrub grows in sun or shade in moist well drained soil. Once established, it will grow in fairly dry conditions too. It is a great screening plant. To make it denser faster, tips should be cut back in order to force more branching at a young age. It has small black berries along the stems for the birds, but deer don't eat it. (It's all over the Ocean Shores area which is also infested with tame, hungry deer!)



Blue Elderberries (*Sambucus* sp.) These tall native shrubs or small trees produce large umbrels of white flowers and copious amounts of blue berries for the birds. The berries also make good jam and, if you're



an old blue-tooth like me, a respectable wine! They like full sun and good drainage, surviving on natural rainfall once established. We offer small plants of two nursery-grown varieties ("Nova" and "York") selected for bigger, sweeter berries than the species.

Other Natives: We offer lots of other natives not discussed above. Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) are beautiful but ubiquitous and we have them. Also, vine maple (*Acer circinatum*) is available as a species and in some exciting new selections. Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*) is here too. We do not carry Noble fir (because it tends to get root diseases in the lowlands after several years) but we do offer Nordmann firs (*Abies nordmanniana*) which are a look-alike with more disease resistance.

If you're into native plants, Lael's Moon Garden is the place to go for an outstanding selection!

