

How to Shop for Native Plants

When buying native plants you should always ask two more questions in addition to the usual ones about hardiness, care, etc.

1. Is this species native to our area?

There is still a large range of variation in what horticulturists and suppliers label "native". Sometimes a species is called a native because it is native to the United States even though is not native to our particular region. You may, for instance, see a species being sold as native in Washington, DC, whose range does not extend east of Ohio. It can live in the mid-Atlantic region but it is not naturally found here. You will also see species being sold as "native species" in Washington whose natural range does not extend north of Tennessee. In this case what you are actually looking at is a cultivar that has been genetically tinkered with to make it more winter hardy. Some native species have a wide range of variability so you will sometimes find species for sale that are native to this region but the variety you are holding in your hand is not. You should always give preference to local varieties that were locally produced when buying native plants.

2. What is the original source of the plant I am holding in my hand?

This is not a standard question, but any nursery that sells true native plants will be happy you asked it. It demonstrates that you know something about native plants. If a supplier doesn't know or is extremely vague in his or her answer, we suggest you shop at another nursery.

The answer to this question tells you two things. First, it will alert you to that very small number of suppliers who are still selling plants collected in the wild. This destructive practice is thankfully disappearing. Never buy plants that have been wild collected. Second, it gives you some insight into how well the plant you are holding will grow on your land.

In some cases, the answer you get will surprise you. You may discover that while the species named on the plant's label is native to this area, the plants you are looking at are actually cultivars.

In some cases, you will discover that, even though the species is native to this area, and the plants you are looking at are not horticulturally modified, they have their origin in an entirely different region of the country. For instance, you may be looking at a sugar maple that was propagated and raised in Minnesota, a columbine propagated in Alabama, or a white oak from Maine. We would discourage you from buying these plants.

We protect a species as a whole by preserving the genetic variation contained in local varieties. Not only will planting a non-local variety dilute the local native variety but these non-local plants are just not going to grow as well for you as plants that were raised from local stock. The local variety of a species has spent many thousands of years adapting to the vagaries of its local conditions. Scientific experimentation has shown that even though a red maple from Mississippi and one from Minnesota look identical, the one from Minnesota is winter hardy down to -55°C while the one from Mississippi will die at a much warmer -30°C . A white oak from Maine is just not as well-prepared to cope with our local conditions as a tree whose ancestry is from Maryland.