



BY ANNA KEMP PHOTOS BY PATRICIA JOHNSTON

Homegrown Horticulture

A native plant enthusiast gets to the root of keeping it local

WITH OUR MILD CLIMATE and long growing season, Victorians love to garden. Although we can grow a stunning range of plants from around the world, more and more local gardeners are discovering the benefits of using native plants in their gardens.

"I remember being interested in what was growing along the side of the road, going on hikes and wanting to know more about the native species that I lived amongst," says Victoria native plant gardening consultant and educator Patricia Johnston. Johnston, who worked as a career counsellor for 35 years, says her interest in wildlife and native plants grew while she was living in Powell River, out in the woods. "Then in 1993, I joined the Native Plant Study Group at the University of Victoria, which got me even more involved."



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A photograph of a modern outdoor patio. It features a wooden pergola structure over a concrete deck. There is a dining table with four chairs and a built-in white stone bench. The background shows lush greenery and a clear sky.

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The Native Plant Study Group, associated with the Victoria Horticultural Society, is a group of volunteers dedicated to learning about and conserving B.C.'s native plants and their habitats. Johnston still gardens with the Native Plant Study Group but says she doesn't want to be known as the expert. "What I have learned about native plants is a result of working with some of the members of the group and sharing our knowledge and information," Johnston says. "I am the one who does the workshops because they don't want to do that . . . I am not the expert, *we* are."

Despite her modesty, Johnston has an impressive knowledge of local plants. She also has plenty of experience teaching others about what she knows and easily rattles off a succinct list of the benefits of gardening with native plants. First of all, native plant gardens can conserve water because so many local native plants are drought-resistant once they are established. "This means that when the plant becomes drought-stressed, it goes dormant and doesn't die, whereas a plant from somewhere else will usually die."

Native plant gardens support biodiversity of plants and wildlife, providing habitat not only for butterflies and birds, but also for microorganisms in the soil and beneficial insects.

Native plant gardens are also low-maintenance, perfect for people who don't want to be tied to watering and weeding all summer. Many people are using native groundcovers, shrubs and perennial beds to replace lawns, which require too much water and frequent mowing. Also, gardening with natives eliminates the need for fertilizers and pesticides.

Choosing native plants prevents what Johnston calls "escapees": non-native plants like English ivy, Scotch broom and Himalayan blackberry, which become invasive and crowd out native species.

On a larger scale, bringing natives into your garden contributes to the health of the ecosystems that we live in. The systems of the Victoria area are the Garry oak ecosystem and the Douglas fir forest, both of which are endangered, explains Johnston.

Previous page:

Row 1 l-r: Red columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*); Solomon's seal and Vanilla leaf (*Smilacina racemosa* and *Achlys triphylla*); Mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*)

Row 2 l-r: Deer fern (*Blechnum spicant*); Tiger lily (*Lilium columbianum*); Fringecup (*Tellima grandiflora*)

Row 3 l-r: Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*); Oceanspray (*Holodiscus discolor*); Red flowering current (*Ribes sanguineum*)

Row 4 l-r: Bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*); Penstemon (*Penstemon fruticosus*); Woolly sunflower (*Eriophyllum lanatum*)



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"In Canada, you find the Garry oak ecosystem only on the southern Gulf Islands and southeast tip of Vancouver Island, with just two small groves on the mainland. If you look at a map of the Saanich Peninsula comparing what was here 200 years ago to what's left now, there's only five per cent of what was originally here."

According to publications by the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team, Garry oak ecosystems support thousands of plant, animal and insect species. More than 100 species at risk have been identified and several have already disappeared.

"The more fragmented that ecosystem gets, the less chance it has of recovering," says Johnston. "By bringing plants into our yards, which are part of the ecosystem, we ease the fragmentation that has mostly occurred as a result of development."

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and go out into the parks,
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Incorporating natives into your garden is the same as any gardening, says Johnston. You have to match the plants to the conditions of your yard. To assess your garden's conditions, look at where the sun and shade fall at different times of the day, where the wet and dry spots are, what types of soil you have and where the winds come from.


Learning about the plants might start with a workshop. Johnston's workshops include a tour of a native plant demonstration garden and a whack of handouts and reading lists. But the best way to learn, she says, is to go for a walk.

"Get a plant guide and go out into the parks, go to the demonstration gardens, go to some of the wild areas and get to know the plants," says Johnston. "It's actually a lot easier than when you are buying a plant from New Zealand, for example, and trying to grow it here. You're here and all you need to do is look at a local plant and see where it is growing."

There are hundreds of native plant species that will thrive here in Victoria. We can grow the plants of both the Garry oak ecosystem and the Douglas fir forest, depending on the conditions.

"If you are growing where there is lots of sun, plant things like stonecrop (*sedum sp.*), woolly sunflower (*erriophyllum*

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lanatum) and penstemons,” says Johnston. “The Garry oak ecosystem has many flowering plants to choose from. Forest plants like sword ferns (*polystichum munitum*) grow well in moist shadier spots.”

Also, if you like to eat from your garden, there are plenty of edible native plants. “Aboriginal peoples used to use a lot of the native plants as a food source,” says Johnston. “Lots of berries, some nuts, and some things for salads.”

When you want to find plants for your garden, don’t just go out into the wild and dig up a native plant, says Johnston. You can, however, take seeds or cuttings from an established plant, being careful not to take more than 10 per cent from any one plant.

You can purchase native plants and seeds from many nurseries and garden centres, including a handful of specialty native plant nurseries. And be sure to mark April in your calendar for the annual native plant sale at the Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary.

Salvaging is another great way to acquire plants and learn a lot about them. “When you salvage, you start to know what the plants look like underground as well as above ground, you learn how to transplant them and where they grow,” says Johnston.

The Saanich municipality has a native plant salvage program you can sign up for. Whenever there is a construction site with plants that will be destroyed, the municipality arranges with the developer for people to take those plants off the property. The Native Plant Study Group also has a salvage program for all areas other than Saanich.

“You can’t take plants and sell them, but you can take them and put them into your garden or into a park if you’re working on some public property,” says Johnston.

Native plant gardening doesn’t have to begin with digging up your whole garden, nor does it require a lot of space. Johnston lives in a condo and has a beautiful native plant container garden on her balcony. Start small. Get a book and learn to identify some local plants, maybe try a few in your garden and see where it takes you.

“People are starting to see the value of native plant gardening,” says Johnston. “We are talking about water conservation, we are talking about pesticide-free, and those kinds of things are very ethical. Native plant gardening is being kind to our Earth.”

To find out about free native plant gardening workshops with Patricia Johnston, call the Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary at 250-479-0211 or see the CDR website at www.crd.bc.ca/water/conservation/outdoorwateruse/workshops/index.htm

For information about the Garry Oak Ecosystems Recovery Team and to order their gardener’s handbook, call 250-383-3427 or e-mail info@goert.ca. ▼

Anna Kemp is a local writer and gardener who would love to see camas growing in the Garry oak park near her house.



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