

# Native plant website always has the right plant

By **KATHY RESHETILOFF**

The starkness of winter offered each of us the opportunity to take a look at our impact on local and Chesapeake landscapes.

More than 16 million people live in the watershed, and each can contribute to or reduce the amount of nutrients polluting local waterways and the Bay.

Oxygen is vital to the animals and plants in the Bay. During low oxygen (hypoxic) or no oxygen (anoxic) conditions, almost all of the Bay's life is affected. The combination of excess nutrients and sediment flowing into the Bay contributes hypoxic conditions.

The nutrients nitrogen and phosphorus are found in organic matter, fertilizers, pet wastes and more. When it rains, nutrients from streets, lawns, farms and sewage-treatment plants are washed into streams and rivers, eventually entering the Bay.

These excess nutrients fuel the rapid growth of algae, creating blooms that cloud the water and reduce sunlight reaching underwater plants and animals. When these large blooms die, huge amounts of oxygen are used up as they decay.

Typical landscaping requires large amounts of pesticides, fertilizers, water and energy (human and gas-powered) to maintain. Environmental impacts can be reduced by decreasing the amount of high-maintenance lawns and gardens.

One of the simplest ways to begin is by replacing lawn areas with locally native trees, shrubs and perennial plants. Native plants naturally occur in the region in which they evolved. The structure, leaves, flowers, seeds, berries and other fruits of these plants provide food and shelter for a variety of birds and other wildlife. The

roots of these larger plants are also deeper than that of typical lawn grass, making them better at capturing rain-water.

While nonnative plants might provide some of the above benefits, native plants have many additional advantages. Because native species are adapted to local soils and climate conditions, they generally require less watering and little if any fertilizing. Native plants are often more resistant to insects and disease as well, and so are less likely to need pesticides. Native plants also provide food and habitat for local wildlife.

The website, Native Plant Center ([www.nativeplantcenter.net](http://www.nativeplantcenter.net)) helps landowners choose native plants that will thrive on their land by matching growing conditions of plants to the conditions they have in their yards. There are more than 400 species of flowers, shrubs and trees native to the Bay watershed on the website.

To begin narrowing a search for the right plants, users type in an address or zip code. This brings up a list and pictures of plants found in one of three regions of the Chesapeake Bay watershed:

**Coastal Plain:** an area of fairly flat topography and more southern climate

**Piedmont:** an area of rolling hills

**Mountain:** an area of high altitude and more northern climate

Specific growing conditions can be added to narrow

the plant list to only those plants that meet conditions found at one's site, such as the amount of sun exposure, soil texture and soil moisture. Not sure which applies to your site? Here are descriptions.

## Sun exposure

**Full Sun:** The site receives at least six hours of direct sunlight a day during the growing season.

**Partial Sun:** The site receives three to six hours of direct sunlight a day during the growing season.

**Shade:** The site receives less than three hours of direct sunlight a day or only filtered sunlight during the growing season.

## Soil texture

**Sandy:** coarse-textured soils that contain a great amount of large particles

**Loamy:** medium-textured soils that are a mix of mostly silt and sand but may contain some clay

**Clay:** fine-textured soils with a high clay content and some silt

**Organic:** soils that contain a high content of natural material such as decayed leaves and bark

## Soil moisture

**Dry:** areas where water does not remain after a rain or have sandy soil

**Moist:** areas where the soil is damp and may occasionally be saturated

**Wet:** areas where the soil

is saturated for much of the growing season

**Flooded:** areas where standing water remains for prolonged periods of time

Those looking for very specific qualities can narrow their search even more by selecting any of the following qualities: type of plant, flower color, fall color, time of first bloom, time of last bloom, type of fruit, time of first fruit and time of last fruit.

At any time during a search, a user can select a specific plant to see a larger picture and all of the details listed earlier, plus whether it is an evergreen or a ground cover and the type of habitat in which it is naturally found. The database also notes if the plant is especially beneficial to bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, waterfowl or small mammals.

Once one has selected native plants for a yard, community garden or school, think about how to arrange them. Plants should be grouped and planted according to the growing conditions. Plants sharing similar requirements are found together in plant communities that make up habitats.

Instead of planting a tree in the middle of a lawn, try grouping trees, shrubs and perennials to create layers of vegetation. These layers provide the structure and variety needed to support wildlife. Plants that produce seeds, nuts, berries or nectar provide sources of food. Stems and seed heads of flowers and grasses can provide food and cover throughout fall and winter.

By redefining landscaping goals and gradually shifting to native species, landowners

receive greater rewards in terms of environmental quality, improved aesthetics, cost savings and attracting wildlife to the property. As the watershed's population grows and land use pressures intensify, it is increasingly important to protect the remaining natural areas and wildlife and reduce nutrients flowing into the Bay. Individual actions are great, and every bit helps. By working together, the Bay and its treasures can be conserved for future generations.

To find the Native Plant Center: Chesapeake region, visit [www.nativeplantcenter.net](http://www.nativeplantcenter.net).

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