



# Capitalizing on natives

Tiarella 'Sugar and Spice' PP16738 has distinctive leaves and a creeping habit. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

## Growing demand for native plants creates challenges and opportunities for nurseries

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

Consumer interest in native plants over the past few years has been steady and growing, but capitalizing on this interest presents several challenges for nurseries and landscapers.

There's often a consumer misperception that natives are unkempt or unattractive. "Frequently folks think of native plants as 'messy' and 'disheveled' and also worry about being all-or-nothing to qualify as ecologically healthy," said Bethany Rydmark, owner of **Bethany Rydmark :: Landscapes**, a landscape architecture studio in Portland, Oregon. "We like to remind folks that plants of all sorts of shapes and sizes can be

combined artfully into combinations that read on a spectrum of formal to informal, and it's possible to design combinations of shapes, materials, and native and non-native plants into landscapes that are pleasing to the eye and soul and broadly supportive of a healthy environment."

Natives are a complex issue generating controversy and confusion.

There are three basic camps in the world of natives and natives, said **Terra Nova Nurseries** Director of New Product Development Chuck Pavlich:

"Camp #1: If the genus and species didn't evolve in my county, it's not a native and I won't accept it."

"Camp #2: Natives are great, but hybrids between species aren't natives."

"Camp #3: I don't care — this is a government project; just give me what it says on the paper."

## Growing interest

The interest in native plants is coming from residential, commercial and municipal sectors. "The demand is pretty even between the sectors, though municipal might be edging out the other two. I'm not surprised," Pavlich said.

And over the years the size of the slices of the pie haven't changed much, but "I think the pie has gotten bigger," Pavlich said.

What's driving the interest? "I feel that it is mostly driven by genuine concern for ecology," Pavlich said. "A good landscape designer or landscape architect can also make the planting aesthetically pleasing."

According to research from the National Gardening Association, 28% of consumers buy plants to help native pollinators.

**Blooming Nursery** in Cornelius, Oregon, has grown its own native plants >>

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offerings and has had good success. “They have been very well received by our retail garden centers,” said Grace Dinsdale, the nursery’s founder who is selling the business to her employees. “Good sales at wholesale, and good sales to the end consumer.”

“Mostly, we are trying natives that will lend themselves to pot culture,” Dinsdale said. “Many get too rangey and won’t be attractive at all in a pot, so they are just not good candidates for garden centers. So we try anything that is a Pacific Northwest native that we feel can make a good showing in a pot, basically. If we can grow it successfully, we add to our selections.”

Nationally, industry statistics show that 10-17% of nursery stock is native plants.

### Challenges and opportunities

But Dinsdale sees opportunity for the industry — growers, breeders, retailers,



*Heuchera 'Changeling'* is named for the unique characteristic of changing colors every week or so. New foliage starts off blushing peach and cherry and changes to champagne and taupe, finally ending up several shades of celadon green, pine, and moss. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

and designers — to work together to bring natives further into the mainstream.

For retailers, suggested planting designs, photographs of how you can expect a native garden to look in order for

a gardener to have realistic expectations can help, she said.

There are also challenges on the grower/supplier side. “Consistent sources of supply will help,” Dinsdale said. “In

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the past they have been hard to find and a lot of them have been fairly unattractive. [We need] growers doing a better job of producing a visually appealing, healthy plant, retailers taking good care of the display at retail (sometimes the native section tends to look a bit weedy), and maybe more actual garden designs using native plants. [That] would help gardeners achieve a better, somewhat more cultivated and appealing garden appearance.”

John D. Miller, president of **Mahonia Nursery** in Salem, Oregon, said he faces the same challenges.

“From a sales standpoint, people often don’t understand the advantages that some natives have in terms of minimal care, drought and cold tolerance, as well as their natural beauty,” he said. “Many natives can meet or exceed the benefits of non-natives: vine maple is a wonderful small tree that can handle poor soils, dry or wet feet, has great branch structure and wonderful fall color.”

And there are other examples.

“Pacific wax myrtle is a fast grower and is easy to maintain as a broadleaf evergreen screen,” Miller said. “Evergreen huckleberry is a compact plant with tiny, delicious berries and reddish tinges in winter.”

But it’s unwise, Miller noted, to focus too narrowly on natives, however they are defined. They aren’t necessarily a silver bullet.

“For example, climate change is making some Northwest natives a poor choice for the long haul and non-natives from warmer areas are sometimes a better choice,” he said.

Miller speaks on this from experience.

“Our Mahonia Nursery is part of a family of companies that includes Wildwood Inc., our urban design and development firm,” he said. “This duality gives us great opportunities to provide educational and experiential exposure to native plantings.

“In Salem, our 64-unit Woodscape Glen rental development includes walking paths, community gardens and a native plant garden,” he added. “The vacancy rate is zero, average tenancy is over eight years and there is a long waiting list. Our most valuable feature is the Northwest feel

created by preserving native oaks, evergreens and using lots of native plants.”

### In demand

Nurseries currently growing natives are finding strong demand for a wide variety of plants.

“We have had fairly good success with most all that we have tried,” Dinsdale said. “Camas is one we have grown for a long time, have good success with and the demand has been robust. Everyone loves a blue flower! Gentians are popular but can be tricky. Mahonia is reliable and sells well. Really a broad selection is important in order for people to make an appealing and attractive garden of natives.”

Terra Nova’s native best sellers are *Heuchera*, *Echinacea* and *Agastache*. “Although *Echinacea* aren’t native to Oregon, they are very well adapted to the Oregon climate, on both sides of the mountains,” Pavlich said. “*Polemonium* loves Oregon, too.”

At Mahonia Nursery, “Our current best-selling trees (from small containers to large specimens) include Oregon white oak, Pacific madrone, mountain hemlock, murrayana pine, alpine fir and Pacific wax myrtle,” Miller said. “Smaller sized best sellers include several mahonias (including compact Oregon grape), evergreen huckleberry, strawberry madrone, and a variety of native wildflowers. We are excited that the larger specimens in both groups are in high demand.”

### Supply

The short supply of natives also presents challenges for landscapers with clients interested in incorporating natives.


“When a client asks for design with native plants, we want to help them understand the range of realistic options around style and size,” Rydmark said. “There are many, many terrific native plants with excellent ecological and aesthetic value, and they can suit a variety of design styles, but often there are real limits to the quantities and mature sizes available for installation.”

“My wish list is for more nurseries»

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to expand their offerings both in terms of size (older, larger) and in terms of species (we have so many useful natives that don't seem to be available in broad production)," Rydmark said.

"When a promising 5–6-foot evergreen native shrub is only findable in a 4-inch or #1 pot, or at 12 inches in height, it's very hard to specify and install," she added. "We need material that can go in the ground at scale. We need plenty of robust #5s and #7s, at 30–36 inches heights at installation, if we're going to make convincing swaps of evergreen natives for traditional exotic shrubs."

The lack of adequate production creates downstream impacts, Rydmark noted — and those impacts aren't just affecting her personally.

"I'm a member of the Pacific Design Collective, a group of women running diverse landscape architecture practices around the region," she said. "Together we frequently wish for higher production of our favorite native trees, shrubs, grasses, perennials, and groundcovers. We're very eager to communicate with growers around our wish lists. We're perhaps not working on enormous projects with massive contract-grown lists, but together we represent millions of dollars in installations around the Pacific Northwest, and we're confident in the future of native plantings."

With more production, the available plant palette for designs would improve. For now, availability is driving design decisions more than Rydmark would like.

"There's a mix between the favorites we specify often because we can get our hands on them, and then the favorites that we wish we could specify if they were available at size and scale," she said.

She went on to name some favorites.

"We love our native silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica*) and can never get enough," Rydmark said. Also sizeable manzanitas (*Arctostaphylos columbiana*, *A. canescens* and *canescens* ssp. *sonomensis*, *A. viscida*, *A. pajaroensis*, *A. coloradensis* 'Chieftan', and *Arctostaphylos* 'Greensphere', 'Pacific Mist', 'Sunset', 'Dr. Hurd', 'St. Helena', 'Howard McMinn', 'Louis Edmonds', and 'Ghostly'), snow-



One of Bethany Rydmark :: Landscapes' projects featured a mixed native meadow bed featuring spring blooming native Camas with native annual wildflowers as green mulch in and among native and ornamental plantings. PHOTO COURTESY OF BETHANY RYDMARK :: LANDSCAPES

brush *Ceanothus* (*Ceanothus velutinus*), and Oregon boxwood (*Paxistima myrsinites*).

Rydmark also said there are generously-categorized Pacific coastal state natives heralding from nearby California that she would love to use more often in Oregon. These include matilija poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), bush anemone (*Carpenteria californica*), and coffeeberry (*Frangula californica*), and Mexican daisy (*Erigeron karvisnkianus*).

And her list doesn't stop there.

"Grasses like California fescue (*Festuca californica*), Roemer's fescue (*Festuca roemerii* var. *roemerii*), and foothills sedge (*Carex tumulicola*) all work wonders in Pacific Northwest gardens," Rydmark said. "We'd love more trees like Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*), and nursery grown mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*).

"For colorful masses and cheerful blooms, we'd love more California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*), showy fleabane (*Erigeron speciosus*), and pearly everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*.)"

Sourcing, supply and provenance can also present real challenges at scale to nurseries.

Blooming Nursery has had to search far and wide. "We use several different seed suppliers, some bare root providers and we have stock in the ground as well," Dinsdale said.

### Plant development and nativars

The interest in natives with better and more attractive growth habits, climate adaptability, and flowers has spurred

development of cultivars of natives or "nativars."

Natives that are being bred are first done so for aesthetics, the phenotype, Pavlich said. "If it's ugly it will never catch on. Even the most bulldozer-prone developer wants their project to look good. Next is breeding for plant adaptability to use natives in dryland and wetland applications, sun and shade, [and other conditions]."

Pavlich said some of the plants ripe for development include:

*Vaccinium ovatum*: Improve habits to make a smaller version for home and commercial landscapes. "It could serve as a substitute for *Buxus* in some applications."

*Arctostaphylos* spp.: Best in summer drought situations make them valuable for low water use landscaping and many species have beautiful architecture.

Oregon grape species (formerly classified as *Mahonia aquifolium*, but now classified as *Berberis aquifolium* or *B. japonica*): Evergreen, ornamental foliage, attractive early spring flowers are manna for resident populations of hummingbirds. Purple berries are edible and used for dyes.

*Eriophyllum lanatum*, Oregon Sunshine: Silvery foliage and masses of bright yellow flowers but needs a better habit and a range of flower sizes.

At Mahonia Nursery, "Two cultivar selection priorities for us include either a demand in the marketplace or a need to help species that are challenged," Miller said. "An example of the former is the



Mahonia Nursery President John Miller, right, inspects an Oregon white oak dug up and being moved by nursery manager Batla Lopez. PHOTO COURTESY OF MAHONIA NURSERY

variety of wildflowers we grow: camas, fawn lily, trillium, iris etc. that are simply great plants; the latter includes wetland preservation and restoration that is increasingly recognized as critical for our planet's survival."

There's also argument from purists who will only accept natives and not 'nativars' that have been cross bred or developed.

"Nature itself creates cultivars, as do growers. Our compact Oregon grape is a good seller because it stays small instead of growing quite tall and like the normal *B. aquifolium* does. The dwarf version occurred in nature and many years ago someone found it and began growing it. It's hard to grow, but we figured out how to propagate it successfully and it's very popular," Miller said.

There's tension between the push for straight native species and the market reality that cultivars often drive adoption. Could that gap be closing?

"Yes, I see that gap closing, especially those that were overzealous in planting natives that have now overtaken outdoor living spaces and garden beds," Pavlich said. "Improving existing species is a long and expensive pathway and consumers (homeowners and commercial developers) are going to have to pay a premium for suburban friendly plants."

In the view of Pavlich, any extra cost is worth it. >>

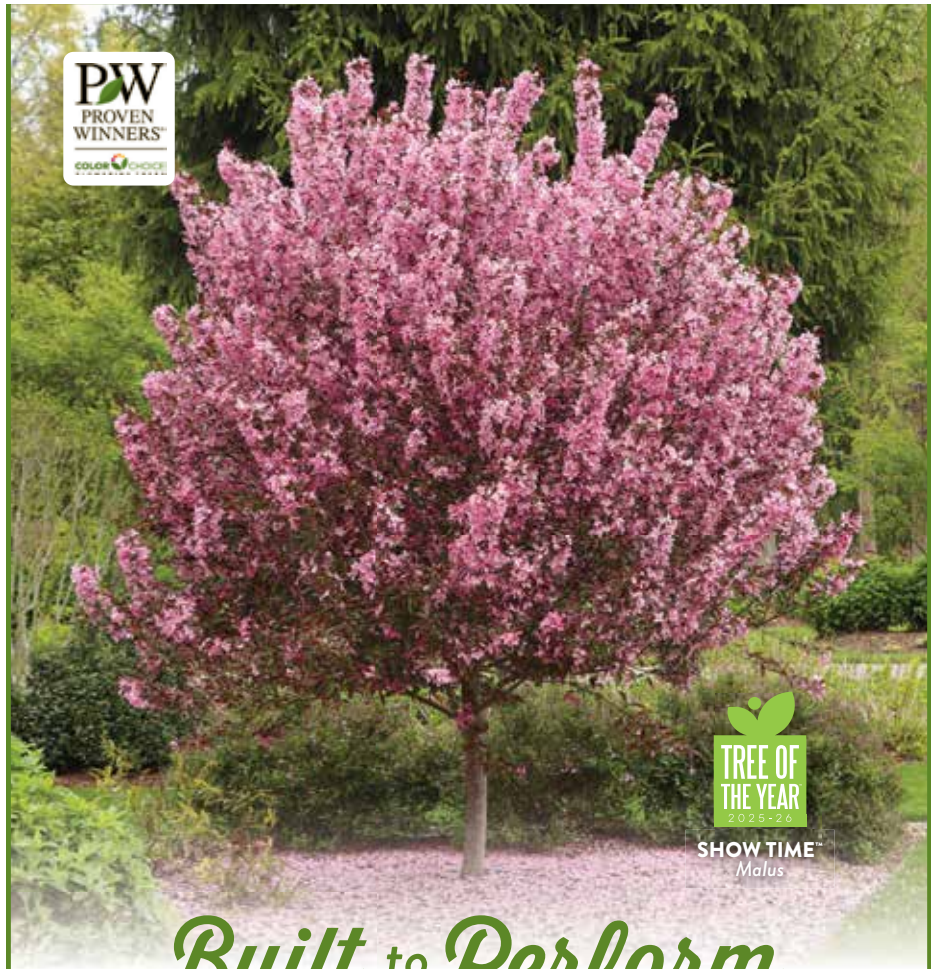
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“Nativars are a solution (not the only) to using plants that are from similar ecosystems that provide benefits through abiotic stress tolerance — drought, extreme heat or cold and sometimes salinity of soils, pollinator attraction, and attractive habits or other aesthetics valued by humans,” he said. “We live in a world that values beauty. Some plants that offer pollinator benefits, fix nitrogen or other important aspects are just plain ugly — and no, I’m not plant shaming.”

Terra Nova specializes in native American perennial development. “Our complex hybrids do well in almost every corner of the nation because we combine the best, most adaptable species found,” Pavlich said. “We build our hybrids from the bottom up. We start with select species and make generations of crosses for years before they are released. They’re trialed in zones 3–10 and we give our recommenda-

tions from there.”

“Until a new generation of homeowners move into a Boomer’s home and clears out the twelve-foot-tall Mahonia eating the front door, we will not have a new audience. Education takes time, and old beliefs die hard,” Pavlich said. “But I have to say, without the old guard standing sentry at the fields, forests, lakes and streams, we’d be a poorer nation, with fewer parks, forests and an unhealthy ecology. People still shop at nurseries for aesthetics. Some natives aren’t too pretty, but very useful. If we improve the aesthetics, that’s half the battle.”

### Future promise of natives


Rydmark predicted that interest in native plants isn’t waning — it’s poised to continue growing.

“I believe we’re growing more grateful and grounded in our connections to

the soil and the lives growing from it,” she said. “With the changing temperature and rainfall patterns in our region, I foresee growing reliance on plants strongly suited and adapted to survive and thrive along with us. People’s use of natives will continue to be on a spectrum, but the numbers will skew toward more and more demand and integration.

“We will also be thankful for regionally and climate adapted non-natives and complementary species that can make themselves at home in our Pacific Northwest gardens.” ☺

*Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing zone boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at [EricaGrivas.com](http://EricaGrivas.com) and *A Gardener’s Path* on Substack.*

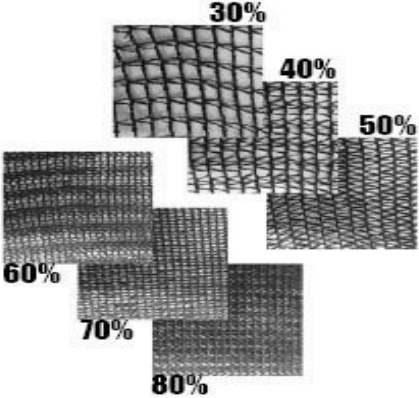


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