

WILD PROSPECTS

This month, Urquhart & Hunt explores the definition of native planting and what the benefits are to our gardens

Lulu Urquhart and Adam Hunt of Urquhart & Hunt won Best in Show and Gold at last year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show and were named Homes & Gardens' Garden Designer of the Year 2022. This month, the duo share their insights on the native planting debate.

THE importance of gardens as a refuge for nature has been coming more and more to the fore. Garden plants of all kinds are an essential part of the habitat mix, providing food, shelter and protection for a huge number of animals. The modern world presents numerous challenges to all creatures, including pollution, habitat loss and a changing climate. Not only are gardens excellent habitat for many creatures but for some they are a lifeline and the difference between survival or not. For example, several species of amphibia, many song birds, many insects and the hedgehog (whose numbers are decreasing drastically in the UK) all rely to some extent on the shelter and resource of our gardens.

Along with our common garden plants, native plants are a crucial resource for wildlife. Native plants are adapted to local conditions, requiring less water than most garden plants, and supporting birds and other wildlife through providing food, shelter, and nesting sites. When deciding which varieties of plants to use that benefit wildlife the most, the question of whether to use native or non-native seems to be becoming more relevant. Yet strangely the answer is not so straightforward as it seems.

The accepted definition of a native plant is one that arrived naturally in Britain since the end of the last glaciation without the assistance of humans or one that was already present and had amazingly persisted during the last Ice Age. Many species that are considered an essential part of the British landscape fail this test and in fact 'naturalised' later, for example the sycamore (introduced in the 15th or 16th century), the beech (introduced by the Romans) and the horse chestnut (introduced in the 16th century). Alongside this we have some well-known villains, such as Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and *Rhododendron ponticum*; invasive species that give non-natives a bad name.

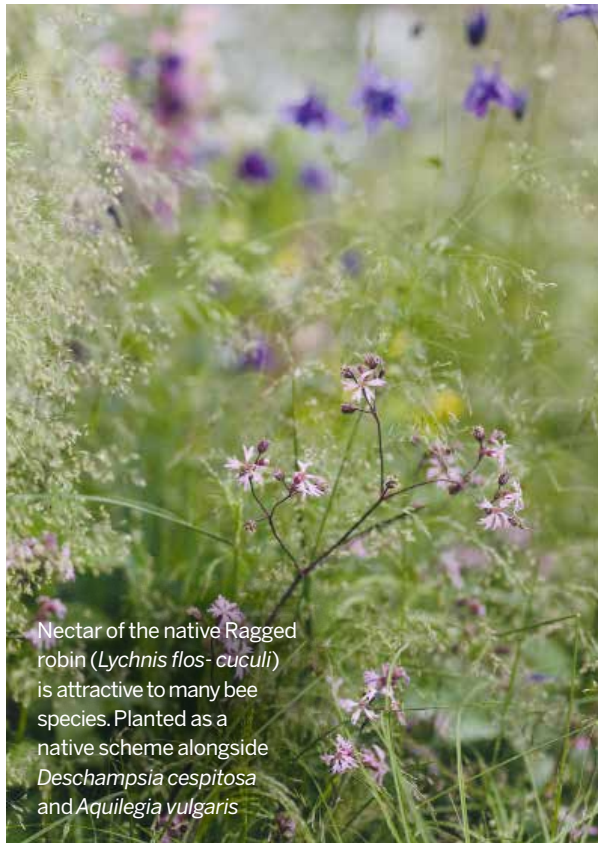


A large majority of our garden plants do not occur naturally in the UK. Down through the ages intrepid plant hunters have collected fascinating plants from every continent on the globe, proudly bringing them back to these islands. These plants bring beauty, interest, form and longevity to our borders and landscapes. Many also have flowers full of nectar that attract butterflies and all manner of pollinating insects: a number of these exotics flower long into the autumn, providing a vital food source when most native plants have long since stopped flowering. This is particularly useful for those hibernating insects like a solitary bee or a Red Admiral butterfly fooled into emerging on an unusually warm winter's day and flying around requiring food.

Whilst the addition of many nectar-rich plants is helpful for the adult stages of many insects, the larval or caterpillar stage requires something more specific and most can only eat leaves from a narrow range of →

'LOOK CLOSELY AT NATURE. EVERY SPECIES IS A MASTERPIECE, EXQUISITELY ADAPTED TO THE PARTICULAR ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH IT HAS SURVIVED. WHO ARE WE TO DESTROY OR EVEN DIMINISH BIODIVERSITY?'

E. O. WILSON, biologist, entomologist and writer



Nectar of the native Ragged robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) is attractive to many bee species. Planted as a native scheme alongside *Deschampsia cespitosa* and *Aquilegia vulgaris*



Perovskia 'Blue Spire' is a beautiful exotic perennial that benefits local pollinators. Planted here with *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Summer Wine', *Penstemon* 'Blackbird' and *Gaura* 'Whirling Butterflies'

plant species. Due to evolving together in a shared location over hundreds of thousands of years the vast majority of these forage plants are native, be they perennials, shrubs or trees. A good example of this specificity is the White-letter hairstreak butterfly whose caterpillars only feed on the leaves of a few of the elm species. Since Dutch elm disease decimated the English and Wych elms in the UK the population of White-letter hairstreaks has plummeted and they are now a conservation priority species in the UK.

With the above in mind, how do we choose between native and non-native plants?

In our planting schemes, we don't, we use both. When looking at a new space, we will try to find out what interesting animals live in the area. If we know that dormice are found locally then we will ensure we plant native hazel or non-native relative (*Corylus maxima*) along with native honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*) or cultivars of the same species.

Regarding trees, we aim for a mix again. The oak supports the greatest biodiversity of any tree species in the UK, once it is mature, an incredible 2,300 species are estimated to be associated with it so if you or your community have the room it is always a good

tree to go for. But then many of the other UK tree species, even the humble goat willow, are essential for certain specific caterpillars and so there is always a tree for the right space. Alongside these natives many of the North American and Asian trees give incredible blossom in the spring and leaf colour in the autumn so the mix works aesthetically.

The list of exotic pollinator-friendly plants is huge, but to name a few we would mention *Monarda*, *Sedum*, *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, *Allium* species and lavender. We also like to use plants that are related to native species and so have the potential as forage plants, for example varieties from the genera *Achillea*, *Verbena*, *Centranthus* and *Verbascum*, as well as marjoram and thyme.

Native plants that hold up well in a border include the foxglove, *Succisa pratensis*, *Violas* and *Valeriana officinalis*. In a wilder area let brambles do their thing.

It was fascinating to hear Fergus Garrett, head gardener at Great Dixter, East Sussex, speaking earlier this year about the result of an ecological survey carried out there. The whole estate has an incredibly high biodiversity but the formal gardens had one of the highest biodiversity ranges recorded in the survey. One of our most beloved gardens, it seems they have the mix between native and exotic plants just right. 🐝

PHOTOGRAPHS (TOP LEFT) EVA NEMETH; (TOP RIGHT) JASON INGRAM