

Where Will These Plants Grow?

Where plants are found in the natural environment offers some clues to where they will thrive in residential, commercial, and conservation plantings. But our customers are often surprised to find out that many native plants will grow in places where they are not typically found in nature. This is because plants found growing in the environment at large do not necessarily grow where they *like*—they grow where they *can*.

It is easy to assume a plant's optimal growing conditions by where we encounter it in nature. However, there are many factors affecting the dynamic competitive interplay between plants and the environment that result in their natural distribution. In an ever-changing natural environment, growing conditions are rarely optimal for any one species. Many wetland plants, for example, tolerate wet conditions but do not necessarily like these conditions. They inhabit places where they are most competitive, surviving where other plants cannot.

Native plants often can be cultivated to grow under a broader range of site conditions than they normally would in nature. This is often the result of decreased competition by careful site preparation or starting with established plants. For example, Shrubby Cinquefoil and Button Bush are ecologically obligate wetland plants, meaning they are always found in wet places in nature. However, these species can easily be grown in a variety of upland landscape situations.

Most conservation and native landscape re-creation projects occur on highly disturbed sites. Therefore, adhering strictly to native species thought to have historically been found on a particular site ignores the current condition of the site. There are many broadly adapted native species useful during the establishment phase of a project. The larger palette of plants to choose from is also helpful when trying to landscape problem areas. For example the north side of a building is a very challenging place to establish plants. These conditions are dry and dark—an extreme site condition atypical of Michigan ecosystems. Shrubs like Silky Dogwood and Red Twig Dogwood, typically found on moist open sites, will grow well in these conditions. The lack of light will reduce the flowers and berries produced, but the wonderful foliage and winter interest these shrubs provide more than compensates.

Natives used in traditional ornamental landscapes can sometimes grow 2 or 3 times larger than they do in nature. This is a common observation for many of our customers as they are accustomed to seeing these plants growing in natural areas. The lack of competition and excessive fertility in many cultivated situations produces such unusually vigorous plants. Increasing the density of the planting and avoiding the use of fertilizer will help address this problem.

Use of native plants is a relatively recent approach to landscaping. Therefore, we do not always know how broadly adapted many natives species are. We are learning more all the time from our own experience and the experiences of our customers. Come out for a visit and we can assist you in choosing the right native plants for your project.

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