

Plants for Nature Gardens: Trees



Photo: Tracey McCann

When choosing any plant for your garden, it is important to consider native options. Garden centre favourites like Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*) and non-native cherries and hawthorns provide little to no habitat for wildlife because insects can't feed on the leaves. This means there is no food for birds, which feed their young mostly insects. The result is a tree that doesn't have unsightly insect holes, but supports no life around it.

In my hometown of Peterborough, the reality of non-native trees is most visible in late October. By this time the native sugar maples and most other trees have shed their leaves, and if you stand on a lookout you can observe an ocean of yellow maples. These trees are Norway maples, a non-native species imported into North America in the mid-1700's from Eurasia. Their close resemblance to sugar maples and their hardiness in polluted and shaded areas allowed them to become a popular street tree. Unfortunately, this species has escaped cultivation and out-competes native trees. Woodlots near my home can be up-to 90% Norway maple. Because it grows very fast and is very shade tolerant, Norway

maple quickly out-competes native trees like sugar maples and red oaks. The leaves are also not very palatable to native caterpillars, despite being in the same genus (*Acer*) as our native maples. The result is a forest mono-culture that supports few insects and thus few birds and other animals.

Even though Norway maple is an aggressive invasive species, it is still sold in garden centres across Ontario. Varieties like 'royal red' are popular plantings in new housing developments for their selectively bred red foliage. Gardeners and landscapers must be aware of this when choosing plants and make conscious decisions to choose native varieties when possible.

The best tree varieties for people living in The Land Between ecotone are species like sugar, red, and silver maples (*Acer*), northern red oak (*Quercus rubra*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), white, green, and black ash (*Fraxinus*), American, rock, and slippery elm (*Ulmus*), basswood (*Tilia americana*), white pine (*Pinus strobus*), aspens and poplars (*Populus*), white, yellow, and grey birch (*Betula*), willow (*Salix*), eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), and white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*). Species like white pine, hemlock, and tamarack can be clumped together to form hedges, while species like elms and oaks can be planted alone to grow into fine specimen trees.

Growing natives can be as simple as collecting seeds and planting your own trees! Hundreds of seeds can be effortlessly collected from species like maple, ash, and elm, then germinated and planted in small pots. The saplings can be grown inside for the winter and transplanted

once they reach a desired size.

Many developers and gardeners avoid planting oaks because they take a long time to reach maturity. Transplanted oaks also tend to have issues with 'j-rooting', a situation where the tap-root doesn't grow straight down and the tree dies. This can be avoided by planting oaks from seed! Collect acorns in the fall and soak them in water until the shell cracks and the seeds begin to germinate. Then plant them about 10 feet apart in good soil. In the right conditions they can grow a foot in a year, and it will cost you nothing! Oaks are one of the best tree species to plant because they support massive amounts of biodiversity.

Native trees can also be purchased from a growing number of landscaping supply companies and native greenhouses. Make sure to ask if the variety you are getting is a native species!