

This Holiday Season, Give the Gift of Native Plants to Future Generations

The use of native plants in the landscape has steadily increased over the past couple of decades. Rarely, however, is someone bold enough to suggest that with the exception of greatly reduced turf grass areas, why not use exclusively native plants all of the time? There are several compelling arguments for this approach, including preemption of invasive species, maintenance of the food chain for our native fauna, and preservation of our natural history for future generations.

Invasive species continue to multiply across the globe, causing billions of dollars in losses. Whether, accidentally introduced in seed from other lands, or intentionally planted for wildlife or landscaping, invasive plants represent a significant portion of these losses. Unfortunately, it is nearly impossible to judge whether an introduced plant is likely to be invasive. Plants like autumn olive and Callery pear were extensively utilized for a couple of decades with few problems, but have spread explosively in recent years. These two species are likely to soon be the most common invasive woody plants of open successional areas in the Midwest. Climate change is further complicating this problem with increasingly mild winters and changing precipitation patterns that may favor certain invasive plants. Problems that seem highly improbable now such as urban woodlands full of *Hosta sieboldiana* or *Liriope spicata* are not out of the realm of possibility 50 years from now. The use of exclusively native plants in landscaping will help preempt such possibilities.

Our indigenous fauna have co-evolved with our native flora, and are therefore dependent on it to varying degrees. Nowhere is this more true than with Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) larva as well as many other phytophagous insects. This point was perfectly illustrated by Dr Douglas Tallamy in his excellent book, [Bringing Nature Home](#). As the book points out, many indigenous insects are unable to feed on non-native plants, due to their specific adaptation to the chemistry of their native host species. As a result, non-native plants harbor few Lepidoptera larvae. Since these larvae make up a large portion of what adult birds feed their young, there are significant ramifications further up the food chain. The use of exclusively native plants can help maintain these food chains and the stability of our ecosystems.

With increasing numbers of invasive plants occupying a greater and greater percentage of unmanaged landscapes, there is a real danger that future generations will have little idea of the character and composition of our indigenous plant communities. While park departments and land trusts put forth excellent efforts to control invasive species on their properties, if more and more species continue to escape and naturalize, their job could become nearly impossible. Generations from now, one may only be able to read about our historic native plant communities, just as we read about the Pleistocene megafauna or the civil war today. The exclusive use of native plants can help preserve our natural history for future generations to enjoy.

PLANT FEATURE: GOLDEN ALEXANDERS (*ZIZIA AUREA*)



A versatile plant occurring in a variety of habitats, Golden Alexander adds sunny yellow flowers to the spring landscape. Occurring in moist prairies, sedge meadows and even floodplain woods, it thrives in full sun or filtered shade. The blooms appear in late April through the middle of May here in central Indiana. It is a great way to add the often neglected spring color in a mesic to wet prairie planting. Its foliage remains attractive throughout the growing season, making it a nice addition to a perennial border. A member of the carrot family, the plant often serves as a host to the larva of the black swallowtail butterfly. In a restoration, it should be utilized with associates in our [wet-mesic prairie](#) and [sedge meadow](#) mixes.