

Plants for Ecology's Quick Start Planting Guide for a DIY Native Habitat

Step 1: Identify the planting location.

Choose the location where the planting will take place. Consider things such as ease of access, availability of water and size. Make sure the size matches your ability to maintain it. More on this below, but consider how wet or dry the area seems to be.

Step 2: Decide what stays and what goes.

Most certainly your location will be a mixed bag of vegetative growth. Identify natives and non-natives. Non-natives should be removed while existing natives should be kept (they can remain in place or be relocated if possible).

Step 3: Removal Process.

Trees and Shrubs

Larger trees and shrubs can be difficult to remove. It is recommended that an arborist be hired for tree removal. Smaller trees and shrubs can be removed with typically available tools such as shovels or saws. I recommend cutting the woody species flush to the ground and then applying an herbicide to the stump to kill the roots. Invasive species will come back if the roots are not killed! Herbicides can be damaging to the environment if used incorrectly. Read the labels. Contact the following to learn more about proper herbicide use and regulation:

<https://oaklandinvasivespecies.org/>

<https://www.oakgov.com/msu/Pages/default.aspx>

https://www.michigan.gov/mdard/0,4610,7-125-1569_16988---,00.html

If you believe that herbicides are required, but you are not comfortable using them, please contact a professional for that part of your project.

Non-woody plant removal:

Smothering: This is typically done with cardboard and mulch. Once the area is cut down as low as possible, cardboard is set down over the existing vegetation and then mulch is placed over the cardboard. Cardboard breaks down but the vegetation below dies in the process. There is no need to remove cardboard. Black plastic sheeting can be used as well. Spread the plastic over the planting space and weigh it down. Leave it in place for the season, and your planting area will be ready the following season or even fall if covered early enough in spring. Plastic must be removed prior to replanting.

Hand removal: Smaller spaces can be cleared manually with readily available tools.

Herbicide: It is recommended that difficult to remove species be treated with herbicide, as this attacks the root system and kills the whole plant. If invasive species are not removed, your planting will not succeed. Do not over apply! See recommendations under *Trees and Shrubs*.

Existing Natives: Work around native species that will remain in the landscape. If it is not possible to work around them, dig them up and pot them until you are ready to plant. Place the pots in a shady area and water regularly to keep them from drying out and over-heating. The quicker you can replant the better.

Step 4: Picking Your Plants

Identify the important factors of the planting location.

What is the sun exposure? Full sun is 6hrs plus of afternoon sun.

What type of soil dominates the space? heavy clay? Sandy? Rocky? Loam? High organic content? Try digging a practice hole. Clay soils make for harder digging while loamy and sandy soils are a breeze. Contact www.oakgov.com/msu/Pages/default.aspx to find out more about soils.

What is the moisture level? Check the area after a rain. How long does it stay wet? Does water pool in any areas? Does the area dry out quickly? Sandy soil will drain quickly and dry while clay soils will hold moisture longer.

Are there structures or natural features in the space that will have to be factored into the planting? Buildings, overhead utilities, gaslines, large trees, roads, septic fields, rivers, lakes, ponds, drainage ditches and or wetlands.

Have a Design:

Plan out your landscape and maintain it. This is especially important in residential settings where your landscape will be visible to neighbors and must fall within municipal codes. A well planned and maintained native garden is the best promotion for natives. More aggressive plants may not be suitable for smaller spaces.

Tips for being a good neighbor:

Do not obstruct your neighbors' driveways or access points.

Do not block sightlines to sidewalks or roadways.

Do not plant vining materials on shared fences unless your neighbors want it too!

Shared property lines can be a source of conflict or a way to bring folks together. Communicate and mind your manners!

Plant in Multiples:

Not everything that you plant will survive. That is perfectly normal and happens to everybody. For this reason plant more than one of any given species. Ideally, one should plant in clumps of 2-3 throughout the garden. Larger trees and shrubs can be planted individually, but I still recommend planting smaller trees and shrubs in multiples.

The purpose of a native garden is to attract wildlife. We are gifting land back to nature and our wild neighbors. As your garden grows, it will certainly be visited by insects, birds, deer, squirrel, rabbits, ground hogs and many other wild critters. They will eat some of your plants, flowers and tree leaves, but established gardens can usually handle such pressures. However, if you plant minimally, you do risk the loss of many species before the habitat can establish. This is why Plants for Ecology sells in multiples for smaller sized plants. There are great products to protect plants in the initial stages of your planting. Use them until your garden has established.

Source your plants locally:

Whenever possible, get your plants from local growers. These plants will be in the best position to flourish in your landscape. Large plant retailers and commercial growers do not typically carry native species. Contact www.plantsforecology.com to find out how to source plants locally.

Step 5: Planting Day.

Keep pending plants out of direct afternoon sun.

Potted plants heat up quickly in pots. If left in hot afternoon sun, they can be seriously damaged. I recommend keeping plants in the shade until planting. Shade will not hurt sun-loving plants short term. Keep plants moist until planting.

Have all needed tools at hand.

I recommend a good shovel, hard rake, flexible rake, small broom, spade, hand trowel and plant auger. A pick axe may be required in harder ground.

Soil:

Have soil on hand to fill in planting holes when needed. Soil is only needed where you dig and plant. No need to spread over the entire area. Basic compost or top soil is just fine for use. You do not need soil with added fertilizer- natives do not need the extra nutrients! Some cities offer free soil to residents. Contact your city's public works department to find out where and how. Hardware stores such as Lowes, Ace or Home Depot offer bags of top soil. Get the soil labeled for fill and leveling- the other soils are geared toward vegetable gardening and usually have added fertilizer.

Mulch:

Use shredded hardwood mulch or straw. Once the plants fill in, mulch will not be as required. I recommend mulching your plot prior to planting. This way you do not need to mulch around delicate plantings.

Watering:

New plantings do need regular watering until established. Mulching helps with moisture retention. If the soil is moist below the mulch, do not water.

Remember the growing requirements of your plants. After establishment, watering is not required. Each garden may have a different timetable for establishment. You need to observe your plantings especially when there is little rainfall. If plants start to look stressed (wilted leaves, dry leaves, weak stems causing bending, poor growth) then resume watering. If during such dry spells, your plants soldier on with no ill effects, there is no need to water.

Step 6: Maintenance.

All gardens need maintenance:

All gardens are at risk for invasive weeds that need to be removed in a timely manner. Native plants may need to be thinned and trees and shrubs will need pruning from time to time. It is in the maintenance that you get to learn and observe. You may find that something from the original plan did not work as expected. Habitats are dynamic and living entities. Nature does not stand still.

A more detailed guide is available here:

<https://www.plantsforecology.com/establishing-your-native-habitat>

If you cannot for whatever reason install your landscape, contact Plants for Ecology. I will be happy to do it for you!

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