

KNOW YOUR PLANT!

One of my professors from graduate school used to say, “Before you begin any research project, *know your plant.*” Right now is always an especially good time to get to know your plants. Which perennials get cut back for winter? Which shrubs do I prune now? What do I do with my roses this spring? I mention the notion of getting to “know your orchids” throughout ***How Orchids Rebloom.*** Here then are some helpful ways to get to know your plants.

We can learn the “nuts and bolts” type of information about our plants like: Is this perennial for sun or shade? My two favorite reference books for this type of information are the *Sunset Western Garden Book* and *The A-to-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants* by Brickell and Zuk. Both are great resources for information about a plant's mature size, cold hardiness, pruning requirements, etc.

One can learn about plants on the Internet. Beware however, that much of the information on the Internet is not geared toward your unique climate or microclimate, wherever that may be. If you live in Seattle, you don't want someone in Miami telling you how to take care of your roses. Local sources of information are always best like classes at local nurseries, garden clubs, and local gardening publications.

In any of the gardening classes and seminars I teach, there are two lesser appreciated notions that I find incredibly important in getting to “know your plant.” (1) What is the native habitat of the plant or *where* does the plant grow? and (2) What is the growth habit of the plant or *how* does the plant grow? Putting these two notions together, the goal for any type of gardening is to reproduce the native habitat of the plant to get the desired growth habit for that plant, while having lots of fun! It's gotta be fun.

The ***native habitat*** refers to where the plant grows in nature and suggests how the plant should be cared for. Plants and all organisms have adaptations that allow them to survive in environmental conditions found in their native habitat.

If a plant is native to midwestern prairies, it will probably require full sun and moist but well-drained soil. If a plant is native to the understory of a tropical rainforest, it would probably perform best as a low-light indoor

plant.

A plant's **growth habit** refers to what that plant does over one entire growing season. What is your plant supposed to do over the course of one year? Does the plant lose its leaves in the winter? When does the plant grow leaves? When does it grow flowers?

Consider also where new leaves originate. Being able to distinguish the youngest leaves from the oldest leaves gives you a powerful tool to assess the health of your plant. It is common, for instance, for most plants to shed one of their oldest leaves once in a while. However, if the youngest leaves on a plant look discolored or deformed, something is definitely wrong with the plant. The youngest leaves should never look sick on a plant, unless it is experiencing dormancy.

If you re-create the environmental conditions found in your plant's native habitat, your plant must survive and thrive!