

TOP 10 NATIVE PLANTS FOR NORTHWEST GARDENS

These days, many gardeners are already aware of the many advantages of using native plants in the landscape (e.g. tough, drought tolerant, source of food). I was recently asked what are some of my favorite native plants. Here then is my top 10 countdown of favorite native plants for northwest gardens.

Starting out at number 10, the **Camas Lily** (*Camassia leichtlinii*) is one of my favorite spring blooming perennials. Also called Large Camas, this tuberous perennial produces spectacular 4 ft tall flower spikes adorned with large white or blue star-shaped flowers. Provide average garden soil, and enjoy long-lasting cut flowers.

Number 9 is the **Pacific Dogwood** (*Cornus nuttallii*), my favorite flowering, native tree. The Pacific Dogwood can grow quite large to 50 feet tall, so be sure you have the space for one. I love seeing huge white flowers (bracts) brighten a dark background like a green space or edge of a woods. Spectacular!

Perhaps one of the most durable and versatile native plants for northwest gardens is Number 8 on my list, **Salal** (*Gaultheria shallon*). This deer resistant, drought tolerant, evergreen perennial tolerates sun or shade, has clusters of white flowers with colorful, edible berries, and large textured yet glossy leaves. Salal greens are often used as cut stems in flower or holiday arrangements. Salal is one of the best native plants adapted to thriving and surviving in tough, dry shade environments. Very persistent and tough, Salal grows taller in the shade to 2-5 feet, but often stays shorter, sometime under a foot, in sunny dry locations.

Another durable plant for dry shade is Number 7, the **Western Sword Fern** (*Polystichum munitum*). The common Western Sword Fern thrives in a variety of conditions from quite a bit of sun to total shade. Lovely fine textured foliage provides good contrast and movement. Older fronds on the bottom of the plant can be removed annually to tidy the plant, or if left on will provide year round shelter for small birds. Grow as single specimens, even in pots, or as a larger groundcover. Remember, most ferns are also deer resistant!

Number 6 is **Piggyback Plant** (*Tolmeia menziesii*), so named because of unique growth habit of creating new plantlets that “piggyback” or grow from the center other leaves. This spreading, low growing perennial is best planted as a groundcover in the shade under taller trees or shrubs. In late spring, interestingly detailed small flowers are produced on slender, delicate stems to 18” tall. The piggyback plant also is unique in that it happens to grow well indoors as a houseplant.

Another great groundcover for dry shade is number 5, the **Inside-Out Flower** (*Vancouveria hexandra*). Its cute little spikes of white, funnel-shaped flowers look like they’re stuck backwards on the stem. Sometimes this plant can be hard to find in nurseries. Treat it like one of its relatives, *Epimedium*, a low-growing semi-evergreen perennial that often gets cut back in late winter to early spring right before the flowers appear.

Tall Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) is number 4 on my list of favorite native plants, and happens to be in the same family (Berberidaceae) as the Inside Out Flower. I love the vivid, glossy, red winter foliage topped with fragrant clusters of yellow flowers in late winter or early spring which then yield purple berries. Tall Oregon Grape is very adaptable to most soils and tolerate sun or shade growing from 3-5 feet tall. Oregon Grape spreads with underground runners, so plant as a hedge, groundcover, or “in the mix“. This is another one the deer tend to leave alone!

Number 3 is my favorite native small tree or shrub, the **Vine Maple** (*Acer circinatum*). The Vine Maple is one of the best native plants for colorful fall foliage. Attractive “in the wild” or as an uplimbed small tree, I like the open growth habit that lets in lots of light. Vine Maples make great focal points (both in containers and in the ground) or blended with other plants in the landscape.

I love columbines, so the number 2 native plant is the **Western Columbine** (*Aquilegia formosa*). This elegant, yet sturdy perennial grows to 2 feet tall or more with sprays of intricately detailed, nodding, reddish-orange and yellow, lantern-shaped flowers. The Western Columbine, blooms over a long time in spring and performs best part shade. Watch for seedlings and watch for hummingbirds!

My favorite, number 1 native plant for northwest gardens is the **Evergreen Huckleberry** (*Vaccinium ovatum*). This very versatile, evergreen shrub, can be grown in sun or shade, is drought tolerant, and has edible berries! Growing to 2-4 feet tall with brilliant bronzy fall color, this small-leaved shrub can even be made into small hedges. Evergreen huckleberries are also deer and slug resistant! C'mon, you can fit one of these in somewhere!

So that's my top 10 countdown of favorite native plants for northwest gardens. I hope you'll try one out this year. Cheers.