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How Native is that Native Plant?

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If there were such a thing as speed dating in garden centers, the plant tag would be that 30 second conversation during which we decide whether to linger a moment and learn more. These days, some tags are like small books, including deer resistance, pollinator attraction, disease and insect resistance, medicinal and culinary uses, and more.

Now, many plant labels carry a new word: “Native.”

Native plants went mainstream over the past five years as many came to understand their irreplaceable value to pollinators, especially to feeding specialists such as the monarch butterfly. We’ve begun to understand that when native plants thrive, they occupy places that might otherwise be taken over by invasive species. Furthermore, many native plants are easier to grow when they are well selected for a location.

But let’s go back to that plant tag. Some tags say US Native, others East Coast, Southeast, Midwest, or New England native. A few say “native to southern New England.” In specialty nurseries, you may even find “genetically native” or “local ecotype” labels.

Is this another iteration of Made in the USA? Not really. Is it part of the CT Grown campaign? Not necessarily. Is it an attempt to confuse us with “greenwashing?” In my opinion, not at all.

Native status is a complex topic that has to do with the plant’s place of evolution over thousands of years, not its impact on thousands of jobs.

At the simplest level, native plants are ones that grew here naturally prior to the arrival of European settlers. In southern New England, of course, they also co-existed and evolved during several thousand years with Native American forestry, hunting, and agriculture.

Professional botanists research this fine line of demarcation, and the results of their work appear in detailed reference works such as the Go Botany database (gobotany.newenglandwild.org) and *Flora Novae Angliae* by Arthur Haines. In Connecticut, we have “Native and Naturalized Vascular Plants of Connecticut Checklist” from the Connecticut Botanical Society, or the society’s plant list at www.ct-botanical-society.org. The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society offers riwps.org/resources. Rhody Native (rhodynative.org) offers both information and plants.

But let’s get back to plant tags. Sometimes nurseries can’t go into the level of detail we need. Here are some thoughts on plant tags:

U.S. Native labels: I recently saw whorled stonecrop, *Sedum ternatum*, labeled “U.S. Native.” According to the Go Botany database, it is actually native to the southeastern U.S. but distributed or “naturalized” throughout New England.

I also saw Oregon grape holly sold as a U.S. native. It is actually native to the ecoregion of the Pacific Northwest and has no naturalized distribution in New England.

Conclusion: If you're trying to plant native, do some research before buying a plant with a U.S. native label.

East Coast, Southeast, or Midwest labels: These are a bit more useful, in that many of these plants are naturalized in New England. In fact, a good native plant resource may show the plant is actually a New England native.

New England Native labels: New England is actually made up of numerous ecoregions, so while this label brings us closer to the "true" native, the plant may not be native in your specific locale. Barren strawberry, *Geum fragarioides*, is a wonderful groundcover that is native to western Connecticut, but not eastern.

Southern New England: These labels, along with "Genetically Native" or "Local Ecotype," are rare unless you shop at one of the regional native plant nurseries: Earth Tones Native Plants in Woodbury, Eden's Natives in Tolland; Little River Natives in Tolland; Nasami Farm in Whately, Massachusetts; Pan's Acres Nursery in Canterbury; Rhody Native in Wakefield, Rhode Island; and Woodland Trails Native Plants in Eastford. Prides Corner Farms, a Lebanon wholesaler, provides native "American Beauties" to numerous garden centers.

With better information, our plant purchases can reflect our values. Plant tags are but one simple step, usually not specific enough. But if you take advantage of additional resources, it is easy today to find native plants—and create a healthier environment.

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