

# A trip to study the ornamental use of native plants

**Billy Mugnier**

I have long been interested in the ornamental use of native plants, and in 2025 I was lucky enough to visit the US to study their use of native flora in gardens. Unfortunately, the UK has lost much of its native plant appreciation and knowledge, having been largely replaced by the Victorian's obsession with the 'exotic' that filled our gardens with imported plants (think of the camelias, roses, and tulips - their ubiquity to British gardens so strong that we often don't stop to question their place in our environment). Many gardening communities in the US, however, have maintained more appreciation for their native ecosystem, with a large gratitude owed to indigenous communities who have fought for generations to ensure this traditional knowledge is passed on. An understanding of the importance of native plants is more widely understood by American professional and hobbyist gardeners alike, and most botanic gardens have an area dedicated to showcasing them, as well as many gardens consisting only of native plants.

The UK's underappreciation of our own native flora has had dire consequences for the entire ecosystem. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world<sup>1</sup>, with certain habitats such as wildflower meadows having almost entirely disappeared from our natural landscape.<sup>2</sup> Not only has this put many species of plant at risk of extinction, but many native insects (and therefore birds and mammals) need these plants too. For example, the Large Blue Butterfly is reliant on native thyme (*Thymus drucei*) as a larval food plant, and without it cannot survive in our landscape. It has already been declared extinct once in the UK but was successfully reintroduced to the South West thanks to a better understanding of its complex lifecycle which relies on wild thyme and a specific species of red ant. Whilst the role of gardens as places of conservation has long been recognised, their role as harbourers of wildlife has never been more important. The continuing sprawl of our urban centres, and trends of plastic lawns and highly-manicured wildlife free gardens is continuing to push our flora and fauna towards breaking point.

But there is also hope. Garden space in England now accounts for 4.5x the total space of our nature reserves,<sup>3</sup> meaning the decisions we make in our own backyards may now be the difference between species surviving or not. There are dozens of things we can be doing to ensure our spaces are contributing to the wider ecosystem, but native plants are a simple and definitive way. Native plants and animals have co-developed for 10,000 years since the recession of the last ice age, and any native plant will support a whole host of insects, birds, and other species further up the food chain.

Another way that planting natives can help the wider ecosystem is by reducing problematic invasive species escaping from your garden. There are many high profile cases of garden escapees causing large-scale issues in our landscape, including *Rhododendron ponticum*, Cotoneasters, and Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*). Invasive species are one of the biggest conservation threats, and whilst many people see native plants as 'weeds' in gardens, the reverse is true in the wider landscape with the exotic plants we enjoy often proving problematic. It's important to acknowledge that we are

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<sup>1</sup> <https://naturalengland.blog.gov.uk/2023/09/29/state-of-nature/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nationally-important-wildflower-grasslands-get-increased-protection#:~:text=Over%2097%25%20of%20wildflower%20meadows,a%20stronghold%20on%20these%20sites.>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.wlhf.org/garden\\_resource.html](https://www.wlhf.org/garden_resource.html)

responsible for the plants that escape our garden. Planting species that are local to one's area of the UK can help reverse this negative trend and re-encourage their presence in the area.

Whilst supporting our ecosystem is reason enough to want to encourage more native flora, it also somewhat reinforces our underappreciation. Why should Britain's native plants be encouraged solely as a vessel to aid other wildlife? In other countries, including the US, it is much more common to plant natives purely for their ornamental value.

Many of our native plants are beautiful and can easily replace exotics as ornamental features. Additionally, by using and appreciating them we also gain a deeper understanding and connection to the land we inhabit - as well as to our ancestors who cultivated, experimented with, and used these plants as the basis for their day-to-day life. Native plants and the knowledge around them are a link to a much-forgotten past, and their stories can help intertwine our own history with that of the land we inhabit.

So, rather than specifically studying native plants from the American North-East, I set out to learn more about how gardens in the US cultivate and showcase their native plants in a way that is both visually interesting and informative to the public. The aim of my trip was to gain experience and skills that would help me to use and showcase plants native to the UK or anywhere else in the world.

The first part of my trip focused on single day visits to botanic and ornamentally focused gardens using native plants. My first day was spent working with John Egenes who looks after the Native Plant Garden at New York Botanical Garden. The space is a beautiful mix of woodland, aquatic ponds and meadow habitats, and John talked me through some novel methods of invasive plant management they've been experimenting with, including Larry Weaner's 'mother colony zones' theory of allowing densely planted areas of self seeding plants to spread into surrounding mown areas. I also got the chance to help John propagate Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and Goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*) plants through cuttings we'd taken, to be later planted into these meadow renovations.



Herbaceous milkweed cuttings being propagated at NYBG.

A piece of advice given to me by John – and repeated by many people I met on this trip – was that in order to fully understand a plant's needs and habits, you must see it in its local habitat. This advice can be applied to any plant, but is much easier to execute for those growing in the wilderness around you!

Since this trip I have started looking at wild plants differently, and find myself asking more detailed questions about the characteristics of the area they're growing in and what effect that seems to be having on the plant's condition.

The next day I visited the impressive Mt Cuba Center - a garden whose entire mission is to educate people on the beauty of native plants. Director of Horticulture, George Coombs, kindly gave me a tour of the garden, and their formal borders, naturalistic woodland and beautiful series of ponds are a stunning case study for using natives. Mt Cuba is well known for its Trial Garden, which rigorously tests dozens of cultivars of a native species, and produces a comprehensive report of their findings that is freely available to read online.<sup>4</sup> I was really impressed by the confidence of the mission at Mt Cuba, that providing people with examples of beautiful native plants alongside free, easily understandable information is enough to encourage people to go home and use them. It appears to be working - local nurseries now struggle to meet demand for plants recommended by reports from their Trial Garden.



A highlight of the trip was seeing Tulip Poplars (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) growing in their natural environment, here creating a beautiful 'Cathedral effect' over the ponds at Mt Cuba Center.

I also visited Longwood Gardens' Natural Meadow area, where impressive academic-grade research is being done on invasive plant management, and Brooklyn Bridge park - an amazing example of creating a space that provides a vast range of habitats for native flora and fauna whilst also serving as a highly functional amenity park for the local population. Visits to Brooklyn Botanic Garden's Native Flora Garden and the incredibly popular High Line provided further examples that prioritising native plants can still provide visually stunning ornamental spaces.

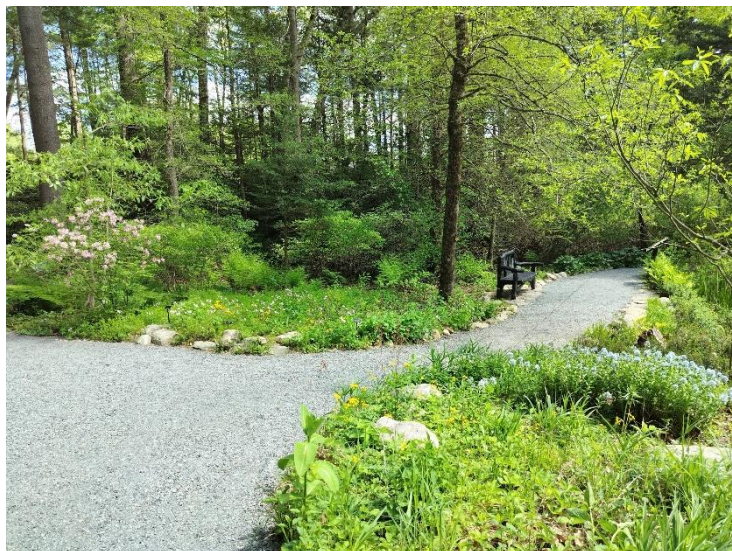
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<sup>4</sup> <https://mtcubacenter.org/research/trial-garden/>



A native woodland growing on pier 3 of Brooklyn Bridge Park - an inspiring example of what can be achieved in a public place.

The second week of my trip was spent working with Uli Lorimer at Garden in the Woods - the Botanic Garden of New England organisation Native Plant Trust. The garden is a magical space that focuses on creating naturalistic communities of plants over showcasing individual specimens. When coming up with a new design, the team match the characteristics of the area to be planted to a local space in the wild, and come up with the plant list based on what can be seen growing there, if possible even collecting seed from that location. This concept of transposing ecosystems into the garden has resulted in a range of natural-feeling spaces, and an impressive variety of wildlife too. It was a real honour to get to spend a week with Uli and the team, and I was so impressed by their knowledge not only of individual plants, but of the entire ecosystem and web of interactions between plants, insects, soil and fungi. This really reinforced the idea that learning more about our native flora is a gateway to a much deeper understanding of our local environment - a journey of discovery that can be incredibly fulfilling.



The quiet serenity of Garden in the Woods.

Whilst working at Garden in the Woods I had the opportunity to visit two conservation projects, one working to conserve local pine barrens and another new initiative turning old cranberry farms into nature reserves. It was inspiring to see this conservation work in action and an important reminder of the above mentioned need to see plants in their natural environment. An area that had recently been burned was full of highly admired Pink Lady's Slipper orchids (*Cypripedium acaule*) - a good indicator that these plants thrive in areas of reduced competition.



The Pink Lady's Slipper orchid was the first thing to reemerge after a spring burn.

A common theme amongst all the institutions I visited was their focus on education. Many spaces that are planted more naturally have a very different look and feel to traditional gardens, and many of the people I met during my trip highlighted this as a key challenge in engaging the public. I had expected most of the institutions to be beacons of teaching for the importance of native plants, but hadn't anticipated their role in also readjusting our conception of beauty in green spaces. Some of the gardens I visited on this trip are amongst the most beautiful I have ever seen, but this beauty came from a tranquillity and genuine connection to the environment they're based in, not from clean lines and onslaughts of bright colours.

Whilst the methods of gardening with native plants I experienced were more similar to me, the approach and mindset of the gardens using them ornamentally differed greatly from more traditional methods. It was inspiring to see gardens presented in a very different aesthetic to what people normally expect. This and the approach to design and planting that takes its cues from what we see in the environment around us are two things that will stay with me going forward. These experiences have proved transferable to cultivating our own native species, and have helped me to gain a clearer understanding of how to work with native plants and present spaces that include them.

Visiting these gardens also reinforced my belief that similar approaches could be replicated in the UK. I hope that the next development of 'naturalistic' trends in ornamental gardening take things one step further and start incorporating more plants that truly would be natural in the space.

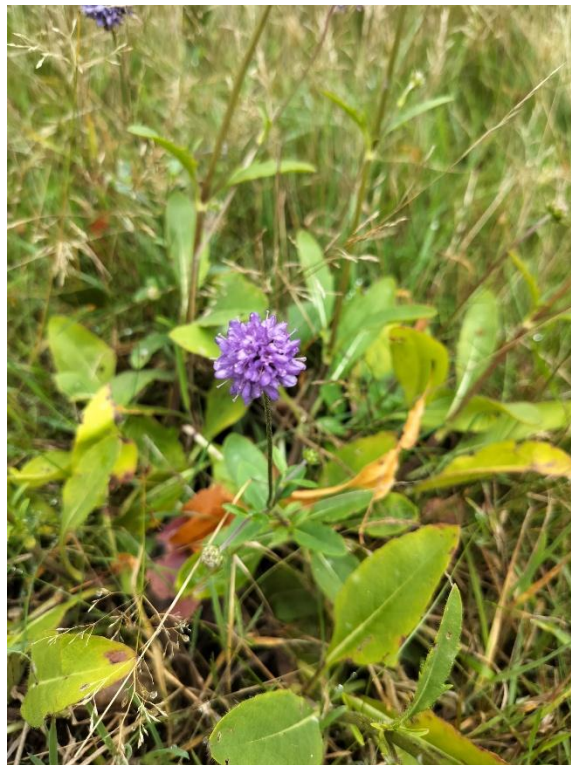
As well as the comparative dearth of spaces dedicated to them, further proof that interest in UK natives is less established than elsewhere can be found in the relative lack of literature and resources devoted to the subject. Much written on the subject in the UK is devoted to broader rewilding and management of specific native ecosystems such as meadows, as opposed to individual specimens. One book I did find to be a useful reference source however was *A Gardener's Guide to Native Plants of Britain and Ireland* by Rosemary Fitzgerald, which highlights many native species that can be used as ornamental garden specimens.

I hope having read this report that you may be encouraged to plant some natives in whatever space you have available. To get you started, here are a few I recommend:

- *Succisa pratensis* - the devil's-bit scabious produces striking dark violet pincushion flowers throughout summer and autumn. The flowers sit atop long airy stems making

them excellent for use in meadows and mixed borders. A host plant to over 20 insects and provides an autumn food source for pollinators.<sup>5</sup>

- *Verbascum nigrum* - one of several native verbascum species, dark mullein is a fantastic garden plant - its bright yellow flowers complemented by dark maroon centres. It will readily self-seed, making it excellent for use in naturalistic plantings and wilder areas. A host plant to 10 insects including the rare Striped Lychnus moth.<sup>6</sup>
- *Scabiosa columbaria* - a beautiful scabious that produces delicate lilac pincushions throughout summer and autumn. Its clump-forming nature lends it to use in a rockery or ornamental border, and can also be grown in pots. Is a host plant to 18 insects, including the marsh fritillary butterfly.<sup>7</sup>
- *Geum urbanum* - following the excellent advice given to me by John Egenes that “the best way to promote and protect native plants is to use them”, I wanted to highlight this common plant. It has been used for centuries due to its edible leaves and roots which have a clove-like flavour, with a long history of flavouring stews and mulled wine. Wood avens is frequently overlooked (and may well already be in your garden) but its dainty yellow flowers and striking seed heads are worth a second look. This small plant also plays host to 26 insect species!<sup>8</sup>



*Succisa pratensis* growing on Hampstead Heath, London.

I would like to extend my thanks to everyone who accommodated me and welcomed me into their spaces over the course of my trip, and to The Merlin Trust and their members who made it possible.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://dbif.brc.ac.uk/hostsresults.aspx?hostid=5507>

<sup>6</sup> <https://dbif.brc.ac.uk/hostsresults.aspx?hostid=5924>

<sup>7</sup> <https://dbif.brc.ac.uk/hostsresults.aspx?hostid=5062>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dbif.brc.ac.uk/hostsresults.aspx?hostid=2462>