

Naturescaping with Native Plants

Naturescaping is a gardening practice in which simple techniques are used to emulate nature. Native plants are selected that are specifically adapted to the light, soil, and moisture conditions of a specific area, ensuring the “right plant for the right place”.

Why Native Plants?

Native plants are adapted to our climate, often do a better job of managing stormwater, and are documented to best support local wildlife. Over 90% of our 10,000 native insects rely exclusively on native plants for survival. 96% of terrestrial birds – *birds that spend most of their life on the ground* - raise their young on native insects.

Backyard Habitat focuses on plants native to our ecoregion, the Willamette Valley. An ecoregion is a *large area that has distinct environmental conditions*. Plants native to an ecoregion have specifically evolved and adapted to those conditions over thousands of years. Our program uses the Portland Plant List (PPL) to determine if a plant is native to our ecoregion: portlandoregon.gov/citycode/article/322280. Please note that for the purpose of this program cultivars and varieties of plant species are not considered locally native.



Canopy Layers

In the Backyard Habitat program, we often talk about the five different canopy layers, which are:

- 1. Ground cover layer** - forbs, grasses, herbaceous plants, etc.
- 2. Small/Medium Shrub layer** - woody and less than 5 ft. tall when mature
- 3. Large Shrub layer** - between 5 and 20 ft. tall when mature
- 4. Understory tree canopy** - less than 30 ft. tall when mature
- 5. Overstory tree canopy** - over 30 ft. tall when mature



Providing multiple canopy layers is important for creating a dynamic habitat. Different canopy layers fill different needs (for food, shelter, nesting, etc.) and support different birds, pollinators, and other wildlife. Each program participant receives a personalized site report that includes recommended native plants for each of these five canopy layers.



Photo: Native plants grouped together from multiple canopy layers in Renita's yard.

Grouping Plants

When naturescaping, look to nature as a guide. Use the “right plant, right place” concept to group together compatible plants that have similar growing requirements (such as sun, soil, water).

Planting an odd number of plants (3-5-7) of the same species close together is a good practice. By grouping plants of the same species, we better support pollinators by offering foraging opportunities closer together.

During the initial site visit, the Habitat Technicians identify areas that are good for grouping native plants into plant communities, in which native plants from multiple canopy layers (with similar growing requirements) can be planted together. In other words, creating “naturescaped areas” in which:

- the majority of plants (50% or more) in that area are native plants;
- 3 or more native plant canopy layers are present throughout those various areas

