

# Naturally native



A Pacific Northwest native rose, *Rosa nutkana* (Nootka rose), is a thicket-forming shrub and can grow in sun to part shade. PHOTO BY ROBERT L. CARR, OREGON FLORA

**T***oxicodendron diversilobum* is a native plant found throughout much of the Pacific Northwest. It is easy to grow and will thrive in a variety of different environments. It does not seem to have a particularly favorite environment because it can grow in wetlands, stream banks, evergreen forests, and hillsides.

It can grow as a shrub, a vine on a tree, or a vine running on the ground. The berries tend to linger on the stems and are a source of food for birds in the winter and deer often browse on the leaves. In the fall, the foliage can turn a brilliant red.

It is part of our natural environment, but is it a plant for the home gardener? No, I think not — because it is poison oak!

Certainly gardeners are not passionate about growing most harmful plants. It is always important to remember the well known rhyme that reminds us that; “Leaves of three, let it be. If it’s hairy, it’s a berry. If it’s shiny, watch your hiney.”

Now that you are smiling about native plants, let’s get a bit more serious about the discussion.

The above example is just an extreme example of how confusing it can be to gardeners, especially novice gardeners, when they hear all the benefits of native plants. The words “native plant garden”

convey a “feel good” buzz. For gardeners, these words conjure up thoughts of helping the environment, providing a good source of food for wildlife (birds, bees, and some small mammals), and gardening with plants that are drought tolerant and perhaps need no extra water in the summer months.

Reflecting on native plants, perhaps we need to try to define just what a native plant is.

When Oregon and Washington became states, boundaries were drawn between them as well as the borders of California and in Canada, British Columbia. Plants were probably not considered when state lines were drawn.

So, when we consider planting native plants, are we referring to those plants that are only native to Oregon, or only to Washington, and maybe southern British Columbia and northern California? Does the Columbia River really divide what plants we can call natives plants to Oregon and not Washington? With birds dropping seeds throughout this region, if a plant can grow and thrive, is it a native?

The answer to that last question is a resounding no. Consider *Hedera helix* (English ivy), which was imported from England, as an example. It is not only not native but is on noxious weed lists in both



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Oregon and Washington. It thrives in our environment, especially in the western parts of both states, and many gardeners consider it native because of its pervasive habit.

So, whether a plant is native or not can create confusion for the gardener and this is where an independent garden center can shine with knowledge to share. The garden center staff can expound on the many reasons, especially environmentally, to plant native plants in home landscapes. They can also assist gardeners in selecting the right plants for their needs. We are very fortunate to have such a wide palette of plants to choose from here in the Pacific Northwest.

The location for planting native trees and shrubs can be critical. Think of walking through a natural wooded area and notice the many ferns. Many of these will grow equally well in a home garden setting with the right conditions. Observe where the ferns are growing. Is it a sunny location, shady, or a mix of sun/shade? Often the labels on native plants do not give enough information for a novice gardener.

Once again, this is a perfect place for the garden center staff to shine. They can assist the gardener in selecting appropriate plants such as those discussed next. The list presented here is nowhere near the actual number of native plants that are available. These plants are only mentioned as a starting point for gardeners wanting native plants in their landscape.

There are many *Arctostaphylos* (manzanita) plants native to our region. These can make superb landscape plants. Most have small urn-shaped white or pink flowers in late winter or early spring. Some have very attractive and colorful fruits. ➤