

Create a pretty, great garden

By Larry A. Sagers

Deseret News

Published: June 20, 2008

Going native? The phrase conjures up many images when it comes to native plants and native landscapes.

Some envision cactus, Brigham tea and sagebrush, while others imagine high mountain meadows awash in wildflowers.

Because Utah is both pretty and great, both scenarios — and many more — are accurate. We enjoy more different plants than many areas of the world because of the state's diversity of elevation, rainfall, temperature and soil.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. declared June 2008 as Utah Native Plant Month. With the recent spring rains and abundant snow this winter, desert natives now blooming look better than they have looked for several years, and I suspect mountain natives will be equally attractive.

Spend a few hours — or a day — hiking in the foothills, or go a little farther afield and visit some of the areas in the western or southern deserts for a chance to see some of the great plants in bloom — including our state flower, the sego lily.

Native plants make good landscape choices if you remember you must re-create the right environment for these plants.

"Native to where?" is the question you must ask as you plan to plant these selections. If your plant choices are native to shady areas in high mountain valleys, the plant will not thrive in hot, south-facing gardens with little or no water. Likewise desert plants will die quickly if planted in an environment that is too shady, gets overwatered or has poorly drained soil.

What follows are a few of the natives that will thrive in your landscape. These are the ones that are blooming at lower elevations and are better able to withstand the heat and dryness later in the summer. As with all natives, they need irrigation to get them started and will grow faster and bloom better with adequate water.

Several hardy cacti grow outdoors in northern Utah. The natives fall into two major groups, the Echinocereus, or hedgehog cactus, with rounded fleshy stems, and the Opuntia genus with flat stems. There are several species that are usually referred to as the prickly pears.

Penstemons are among the most common and most useful groups of native plants in Utah. There are more than 70 species in Utah, and numerous selections are available. They come in a variety of heights and colors and are stunning in the landscape.

Firecracker Penstemon grows 3 feet tall and is a sun-loving perennial that produces showy spikes of brilliant red tubular flowers from May to July. The broad shiny leaves remain attractive during the winter, and the red flowers attract hummingbirds.

Palmer's Penstemon is even taller and will bloom for most of the season, producing tall spikes of fragrant, pink flowers that resemble snapdragon. It has evergreen foliage with large waxy, gray-green leaves. It needs little water and has few problems.

Other attractive native penstemons with blue flowers are the Firleaf penstemon, Hotpot penstemon, Leo penstemon, Mat penstemon and Wasatch penstemon. Purple flowers are found on Littlecup penstemon, Utah penstemon and Whipple penstemon. If you want red flowers, look for Bridges penstemon.

Indian paintbrush is another common native but is rarely used in landscapes. It needs to grow with another plant to succeed. One host for the common spring-flowering Indian paintbrush is big sagebrush, as paintbrush has the ability to draw water and nutrients from the sagebrush, so consider using these plants together.

Another favorite is the Desert Four O'clock — or *Mirabilis multiflora*. The plants have deep magenta flowers that bloom through the summer into the fall. The plant grows 18 inches high and spreads several times that wide. It thrives on neglect. The dark green foliage is attractive but dies back during the winter. The flowers are fragrant and attract hummingbirds and hawk moths.

Several species of primrose (the *Oenothera* species, not the primulas) thrive in our area. *Oenothera caespitosa* is a dwarf primrose that blooms in the foothills in May to June, and with supplemental water in a landscape, it will keep blooming into October. The fragrant white flowers turn pink with age. Look for several other primroses that will thrive in our landscapes.

Look for these and other natives at local nurseries or find the seeds and grow your own. Never collect plants, because it is illegal to take them from government lands and is only acceptable on private land if you have permission. Transplanting these plants from their natural state is often fatal to the plant.

Larry A. Sagers is the horticulture specialist, Utah State University Extension at Thanksgiving Point.
© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved