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A Brief History of Native Plants[®]

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The term “native plant” seems to have entered the lexicon of horticultural speak in a big way over the past few decades. As a lifelong nurseryman and native plant grower, the question of what is a native plant comes up with great frequency around my office. It seems everyone knows what a native plant is, but we don't all agree on the same definition.

This seemingly straightforward word “native” creates enough controversy to cause some real confusion. A simple web search will quickly demonstrate the problem, and a good place to start is this Wikipedia definition which states: “Native plant is a term to describe plants ‘endemic’ (indigenous) or ‘naturalized’ to a given area in geologic time”) (Wikipedia).

At first glance this doesn't look too bad to most people; however, as is often the case, one size really doesn't fit all. If we consider geologic time, the fossilized *Ginkgo biloba* forest in eastern Washington provides evidence of what once was a native plant in that region, of interest to a paleontologist, but not very useful for today's native plant propagator or restoration ecologist.

The words endemic and indigenous seem straightforward; however, when the word “naturalized” is added to this definition, things start to get fairly fuzzy. So here's another definition from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources that narrows down the description a bit more: “A native plant is one which occurred within the state before settlement by Europeans.” This definition sets the starting line, at least in Pennsylvania, at the time of European contact. They also go on to address the issue of “naturalized” with this statement: “An introduced or non-native plant is one that has been brought into the state and become established. At the turn of the 21st century, about 1,300 species of non-native plants existed in Pennsylvania. That is 37% of Pennsylvania's total plant flora (which is about 3,400 species), and more introduced plants are identified every year.” (The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources)

The United States National Arboretum, like Pennsylvania, distinguishes “naturalized” from “native” in this statement: “A native plant is one that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat without direct or indirect human intervention. We consider the flora present at the time Europeans arrived in North America as the species native to the eastern United States” (The United States National Arboretum).

These definitions of a native plant are comfortable including everything present before European contact as native. This notion seems to have fairly wide acceptance in North America, though it's not universal. The History of Native Plant Communities in the South references John and William Bartram's 18th-century, historically significant expedition and book which notes the issue of Native American influence on the indigenous flora with this statement: “Native plant communities in the South have been much studied and written about since the Bartram's explored the region in the 18th century. Bartram noted that Native Americans as well as European settlers altered native plant communities by intentional burning, land