



Urban Harvest

Cast an Eye to Growing a Cutting Garden of Native Plants

By Chris LaChance

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Informal arrangement of native plants.

The cut-flower industry is reporting booming (and blooming) sales, but 99 percent of cut flowers sold in Texas are not grown here. In fact, most come from outside of the United States. Even the celebrated yellow rose of Texas history and legend is imported. Texans spend \$234 million annually on cut flowers and related products; however, many of the flowers we choose are Texas native plants that have become staples of the industry. Few are grown in their home state with less than \$500,000 of cut flower production occurring in Texas.

There are many reasons to turn these statistics around - from fostering state pride to making good eco-sense. Texas-grown flowers and foliage can be harvested and delivered in less than 48 hours, cutting down the need to transport flowers long distances and protecting varieties

that are more delicate and ship poorly. Because native plants are well-adapted to our soils and climate cycles of droughts and floods they are less labor intensive to grow. In general, once they are established, they require less water and because of their resilience grow well without the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Furthermore, native plants provide critical habitat for wildlife, especially our native pollinators, (more than 75 percent of flowering plants depend on animal pollinators) and help to maintain biodiversity within ecosystems.

Next time you decide to choose a flower arrangement for a loved one or to grace the dining table, consider using Texas native plants. Better yet, grow a cutting garden full of varieties that celebrate our ecological heritage. You will be surprised by the long and varied list.

A few things to consider before we address individual plants: This is not a license to harvest flowers from the wild or on public or private property.

Plant native plants in groups for visual impact in the garden. Do not forget foliage plants and native grasses. Cut flowers at their peak, preferably once the morning dew has evaporated from leaves and petals. Some flowers may be picked before opening while others are harvested when florets are half or fully open. Use clean, sharp shears or knife to prevent damage to stems and maintain freshness. Immediately put cut flowers in water and keep them in a cool place until ready to use, making a fresh cut right before placing them in the vase.

The Lady [Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](http://www.wildflower.org) includes a "Cut Flower Suitable Species" list on its website at www.wildflower.org. Included are some of my favorites, although compiling a short list is challenging.



Eastern Redbud, *Cercis canadensis*.

Eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*, a native understory or specimen tree, has lovely lavender-pink flowers in spring followed by heart-shaped leaves during the rest of the growing season. It can tolerate sun to part shade in a well-drained soil. Mature height can be 20-30 feet.

Possumhaw holly, *Ilex decidua*, a large shrub or small tree, likes well-drained to moist soils and full sun, but can take light shade. Most

striking in winter are the foliage free branches that are covered with bright red berries, appearing just in time for making beautiful holiday arrangements or provide food for wildlife.

White gaura, *Gaura lindheimeri*, known as whirling butterflies, does, indeed, resemble a riot of the tiny winged creatures. It prefers sun and a well-drained area.

Inland sea oats, *Chasmanthium latifolium*, is one of the clump-forming native grasses for part-shade to shade. Also known as "fishing pole plant," its graceful, arching seedheads can be used in fresh or dry arrangements. Be sure to harvest the branches for drying before the birds beat you to it. It can be aggressive, so plant in a bordered bed.



Inland Sea Oats, *Chasmanthium latifolium*

Indian blanket, *Gaillardia pulchella*, adds 1- to 2-inch wheels of orange-red and yellow to the garden and the flower arrangement. Preferring a sunny, well-drained site it can often be seen along roadsides in summer when many flowers have wilted from the heat.

Black-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia hirta*, a dark yellow, daisylike flower is a summertime favorite in many parts of the country. Once established, the black-eyed Susan is quite drought tolerant and holds up well in cut arrangements. Give it full sun and good drainage.

Beebalm, *Monarda fistulosa*, sports clusters of shaggy pom-poms of color - in white, lavender or pink, although varieties now can be found in a wider range of colors. Its flowers are very attractive to hummingbirds and butterflies, while the leaves are used in herbal tea blends.



Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*.

Purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*, makes wonderful flower arrangements with its sturdy stalks and daisylike flower heads. Native to the American prairie, it prefers sun and a well-drained soil. Although attractive to bees, butterflies and birds, it is considered to be deer resistant. Can I say this is my favorite favorite?

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