

Make a Difference

By Kelsi Franzen

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WHIDBEY ISLAND, A LANDSCAPE WELL-SUITED FOR NATIVE PLANT KNOWLEDGE

"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." This old adage illustrates the importance of knowledge and skill acquisition. Let's extend that thought, for a moment, beyond fish and apply it to native plants on Whidbey Island. Our island is part of one of the most distinctive and fascinating ecosystems on earth – the north Pacific coast of North America. Native plants are better adapted to this region and form the foundation of long term health and vitality for all species that reside within each ecosystem. Why might one consider learning about native plants? To know what native plants exist here helps us to better understand ourselves and our connections to our landscapes. To understand how these native plants preserve biodiversity and how they can also meet your needs as a homeowner – be it in your garden, as a hedge, or as slope stabilizers or runoff reducers in your landscape – is knowledge which will feed you for a lifetime.

Through my work as an educator, I've had the opportunity to work with a diverse range of students in a variety of Pacific Northwest ecosystems over the past ten years – prairies, wetlands, alpine, forests, lakes, marine environments, and agricultural lands. Some of the most highly productive ecosystems on earth can be found here. As a fifth generation Whidbey Islander, I've noticed a unique and intriguing trend arising on Whidbey – the desire among people to connect more with and learn about native plants. "What plant is this? How can I use it for that?" There is an increasing desire to cultivate an individual's "sense of place," to learn more about what's around them and understand how it all connects. Exciting news!

Perhaps you're already a native plant enthusiast who thirsts for more knowledge or someone new to the world of plants and not sure where to start. Maybe you're a gardener, whose intent is to find something beautiful but easier to establish and maintain, which can save you money. Maybe you're a homeowner looking to build a hedge for wind or noise protection. Maybe you want to increase habitat for wildlife and pollinators on your land. To understand native plants, you must first have a dash of awe, a sprin-

gling of inquiry, and a bit of humility. It takes time and patience to learn, and the ability to reach out and ask questions. But knowledge will come! The greatest beauty is in learning how to "fish," right?

Consider the following seven tips an introduction to what took me a decade to learn and succinctly articulate. A mini-version, so-to-speak, of the old adage: "... teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

Seven Tips Toward Native Plant Knowledge on Whidbey Island

Tune In – I encourage you to stop what it is you're doing, right now, and look up. Where are you? If you can, go outside for a moment and locate a patch of plants in your yard, or park, or wherever they may appear. Engage all your senses. What do I see and smell? What do I hear and feel? What might I taste if I knew what plants here were safe and edible for my consumption? Notice plant patterns in your landscape. Record what you see. Create a toolkit to help expand your learning – field journal, pencil, and camera are great starters.

Seek Mentors – Native plant field guides, classes, and online groups abound in our region. Compare and contrast and find what you like. There are businesses and organizations whose staff can be mentors to you if you reach out and ask. Start with the island's

nurseries and landscaping experts, or call up organizations like the Whidbey Island Conservation District, Native Plant Stewards, Whidbey Camano Land Trust, Pacific Rim Institute of Environmental Studies, or WSU Extension Master Gardeners Program. They most surely will share additional resources with you. Depending on what angle you're leaning toward in your native plant learning endeavors, your local library can help you find the best books. Two favorites of mine are *Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast: Washington, Oregon, British Columbia & Alaska* by Jim Pojar and Andrew MacKinnon and *The Natural History of Puget Sound Country* by Arthur R. Kruckeberg.

Pick a Place – Now that you've increased your awareness and have some resources to guide you, pick a place to start applying your knowledge. Root yourself in a geographical area that is significant to you. Perhaps it's your backyard or garden, or a public park, or a specific watershed. Maybe it's a trail you travel often with your friends, or a particular patch of green tucked in the most unlikely of places. With book in hand, and mentors to call, find out your area's history and current land use. Ask yourself these questions: How was your area formed? How has land use changed over time? What plants currently thrive, or are at risk? How do plant communities change with the seasons?

Create and Experiment – You've got a few species memorized, and a whole lot more questions now. Try practicing some creativity and incorporate native plants into your landscapes at home. With help from your mentors, it's likely you can identify in just a few minutes what native species already exist. I encourage you to keep those plants there, and enhance them! Perhaps the unruly, unkempt aesthetic is not your style? No worries! Trim plants back a bit and experiment by adding some new native plant species based on your site's conditions. What native plants are already here? Is the area I'd like to plant dry, moist, well-drained, steep or gradual sloped, in full sun or partial or full shade? These are some questions to consider. Native plants are more resilient to



establishing themselves in our region and are overall easier to maintain than their non-native counterparts. Visit the USDA PLANTS Database at <http://plants.usda.gov/java/> for extensive resources about plants and their planting requirements.

Find Balance – Be sure to practice patience with yourself as you learn. It takes time and you've gone through tips 1-4 in full already, you're well on your way to finding balance. When in doubt, find out by reaching out. It's okay to keep asking questions!

Share and Support – A real teacher knows they will always be a student to some extent. Learn more by sharing your knowledge with others. You can make big impacts in small ways by sharing your stories with others, and learn more yourself through conversation.

Stay Open – Remember, it takes practice and patience to cultivate a connection with native plants. Keep your mind open to the possibilities. Start with just one goal, seek out one book, one mentor, and pick one place to start your search for knowledge. Before you know it, you'll be the one people come to for lessons about "how to fish."

Now, it's your turn to get started! At the Whidbey Island Conservation District, we are local professionals invested in the island community who understand a wide range of natural resource conservation topics and we are here to provide non-regulatory, free, boots-on-the-ground technical assistance and education to Whidbey Island's residents, landowners, and organizations. We get a lot of questions about native plants and are happy to help you. Our 2017 Annual Native Bare Root Plant Pre-Sale is underway now through January 31, 2017. Choose from 28 species of native conifer and deciduous trees, shrubs and ground covers by ordering online. A link to our online storefront can be found at www.whidbeycd.org or you can call us at (888) 678-4922. We're offering three free workshops focused on native plant topics in January. The workshops will be held Sat., Jan. 14, 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. at the Coupeville Library in Coupeville; Sat., Jan. 14, 2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. at Bayview Farm and Garden in Langley; Sat., Jan. 21, 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. at Hummingbird Farm Nursery and Gardens in Oak Harbor. We hope to see you there!



WHIDBEY ISLAND CONSERVATION DISTRICT



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