



# Make a Difference

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## PLANNING YOUR PERFECT NATIVE PLANT LANDSCAPE: PART 2

The Pacific Northwest's native plant biodiversity rivals that of almost any other region in the world. From sweeping coastal shorelines to the inland Salish Sea-scapes, to the colorful array of wildflowers found on the glacial outwash prairies and Garry Oak woodlands of the islands, to the gnarled trees at timberline and the high mountain subalpine meadows, deep into towering forested valley – we live in an amazing place worth conserving.

In October's *Make a Difference* article – Part 1 of this 3-part series about how to go about crafting your "perfect native plant landscape" – we were introduced to the roles and benefits native plants can play in both conservation on your land and in meeting your aesthetic goals as a gardener and lover of landscape projects. Native plants are those which are from, or indigenous to, a region because they've established communities over long periods of time with little to no human assistance and continue to thrive in balance with other native plant species, contributing to overall biodiversity and resiliency.

Native plants can meet your aesthetic goals as well as provide numerous conservation benefits – reducing energy costs (as they often require less water and maintenance than exotics), cleaning air, attracting and supporting local pollinators and wildlife, improving water quality, and stabilizing soil through strong root systems. Before you select native plants for your upcoming landscape project, we learned of the importance to take time and learn about our landscape features – soil type, topography, slope and aspect, climate, water availability and existing native plant communities. Selecting species best suited to each property owner's landscape provides a higher success rate establishing those plants.

Within one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, Whidbey is host to some of the richest plant communities in the Pacific Northwest. Because of Whidbey's temperate climate (thank you, Pacific Ocean!) and its location just east of the Olympic Mountains in a "rain shadow" providing residents with less rain than even our neighbors to the north and south, a host of native plant species thrive here that aren't found elsewhere. Take, for example, the fact Whidbey Island's nearly 170-square-mile land mass contains within it a host of unique ecosystems – shorelines, bluff slopes, wetlands, marshes, glacial outwash prairie, young forests, second-growth and mature forests, each with their own plant communities.

In Part 2 of our Craft Your Perfect Native Plant

Landscape, I encourage readers – as you've hopefully come to learn a bit more about your landscape's characteristics from reading last month's article – to be inspired by the rich array of ecosystems we have here on Whidbey Island. Look to your landscape where you plan to plant and ask yourself – "How can I incorporate the features I enjoy on Whidbey's shorelines, bluffs, wetlands, and forests into 'microsite' features in my own landscape design?" Microsites is a term used in landscape design to describe a zone within your larger landscape area that contains unique conditions or characteristics, then playing up those characteristics by selecting plant species best suited for them. Microsites may be based on temperature (i.e. a "hot" or "cold" area), light availability (i.e. a "shade" or "sun" garden), or soil moisture (i.e. a wet area or drought-tolerant rock garden) – to give you a few starter ideas. Perhaps not all of us have enough microsite conditions to bring every single one of Whidbey Island's ecosystem niches in micro-scale to our own homes, but starting to think in terms of biodiverse landscapes helps us to choose a richer selection of native plant species which enhances this island on which we reside.

With the microsite concept in your back pocket, consider looking at your native plant landscape project with an artistic lens – through the eyes of landscape design. Not just a profession, landscape design is an art form. Incorporating the elements of unity, line, form, texture, color, scale, balance, simplicity and variety, emphasis and sequence, landscape design has the powerful ability to unify these into a design that creates beautiful, pleasing, and practical outdoor living spaces. Habitat conservation and your landscape's beautification can go hand-in-hand when you chose to incorporate native plants into your garden. When planning that perfect native plant landscape, consider the following landscape design elements and ask yourself these important questions:

**Unity** – Unity is the underlying storyline of your landscape design. Unity organizes groups of plants into various chapters of your landscape's tale, attracting and holding attention as its goal. Envision your landscape and what you'd like it to say. Ask yourself – "Do I want this landscape to draw the viewer in or move them away? What story do I want to tell with my design? What role will this landscape play on my overall property?"

**Line** – Line connects and defines space within a landscape, creating the effect of an outdoor "room" with borders and boundaries. Line can be horizontal or vertical, straight or curved. Straight lines are often associated with formal gardens, whereas meandering and curved lines

tend to be found in informal gardens more typically associated with the Pacific Northwest. Ask yourself – "Am I wanting to create a more formal or informal setting?"

**Form** – The shape, or form, of a landscape design is determined by lines created by branches and twigs of individual plants and groups of plant. Additionally, direction and arrangement of these plants is important in developing overall landscape form, providing a three dimensional aspect to the project. For individual plants, consider where you want the viewer's eye to travel. Pyramidal forms (such as those of our native conifer trees) direct eyes upwards, whereas weeping and vase-shaped forms divert the eye downward to what's beneath the plant. Geometric shapes, such as rounded or square forms tend to be associated with formal gardens. Informal gardens tend to have more fragmented edges in their plant forms, with meandering lines and directions. Ask yourself – "Where do I want the eye to rest? How will I achieve unity through the use of specific forms, both in individual plants and in plant groupings, in my landscape project?"

**Texture** – Texture relates to the size and shape of individual plants' leaves and twigs, as well as the spacing between those leaves and twigs, the glossiness or dullness of leaves, the colors of the foliage and blossoms, and the way light plays throughout the plant or plant groupings. Texture can be defined "close-up" or "at-a-distance." Close-up texture can be determined by looking at the size and shape of the leaves and twigs on a plant – larger leaves are often associated with rougher texture, whereas more delicate twigs and leaves are found to be softly textured. At a distance, the entirety of your landscape project can define texture as how light and shadow play against a group of plants. Ask yourself – "Based on the selection of plants I want to incorporate into my landscape, how will I balance soft- and rough-textured plants both up close and at a distance?"

**Color** – Color gives a landscape design its greatest appeal and is powerful in establishing the mood and feeling of the landscape. Did you know that color therapy is a popular topic in our culture? Warm colors tend to stimulate and encourage the viewer to come forward, whereas cool colors are more restful and suggest distance. Ask yourself – "What colors work for the story line I'd like to portray with my landscape and conservation goals?"

**Scale** – The scale of your landscape design can be either absolute, which compares the value of your landscape to a fixed object (such as your house), and relative, which compares values of the landscape project itself and often is linked with color. For example, a relative high scale landscape promotes action and movement due to the use of strong, warm colors, whereas a relative low scale landscape promotes restfulness and relaxation due to its use of cool colors. Ask yourself – "How do I want my landscape to be perceived as it relates to my house? Do I want a 'cabin-in-the-woods' feeling with towering tall trees nearby or smaller landscaped trees adjacent to the home to make it look bigger? Do I want people to stay a while or move quickly past?"

**Balance** – Balance is how equilibrium is attained on both sides of a landscape design. Formal gardens are associated with repetition of plants and patterns on both sides of the design, whereas informal gardens' patterns and plants differ on

both sides – contributing to the feeling of being "alive" and more natural. Ask yourself – "Do I wish for its patterns to be repeated on both sides of the design, providing stability? Or, would I like the patterns to differ on sides, giving movement and curiosity?"

**Simplicity & Variety** – Simplicity in a landscape is achieved by a degree of repetition of plants or patterns in a landscape, but without overdoing it. Variety is achieved through a diverse selection of plant types, forms, textures, and colors, reducing monotony. You need both simplicity and variety to balance each other out, so that a landscape is not too chaotic, nor too monotonous. For example, repeat plant selections in sweeps and groupings. Many landscape design literature suggests avoiding "zipper plantings" (repetition of color, texture, etc. i.e. red-white-red-white-red-white). Ask yourself – "How will I balance simplicity and variety in my landscape design?"

**Emphasis** – Our minds look for dominant objects in a landscape and those which are subordinate. Think of a lone tree in a field. Where will your eye be drawn? The use of emphasis in landscape design helps to determine which plants are considered dominant (attracting the viewer's eye) and which plants are subordinate (less likely to hold attention). Emphasis can be achieved by form, color, or texture. Ask yourself – "What plants will I plan to emphasize in my design? Which plants will be supporting and how?"

**Sequence** – Represented as the change or "flow" in size, form, color, and texture, sequence gives life and movement to an overall landscape design. Ask yourself – "What type of flow do I wish to evoke throughout my overall landscape design? How will the sequence of size, form, color, and texture change throughout the design to create the movement I want to achieve?"

Pacific Northwest native plants have increased in popularity in recent years for use in our landscapes, which presents an exciting opportunity for each of us to exercise our artistic muscles and employ some landscape design techniques in our planning, as well as make a difference in conservation – all starting with our "backyards." From ground covers to shrubs, to conifer and deciduous trees, the Pacific Northwest presents us with hundreds of native plant species to choose from, often available at local plant nurseries on Whidbey Island. Additionally, the Whidbey Island Conservation District is half-way through its annual Native Bare Root Plant Sale – the biggest outreach event of the year. With over 30 species of native species to choose from, learn more by visiting [www.whidbeycd.org/native-plant-sale.html](http://www.whidbeycd.org/native-plant-sale.html) or calling 888-678-4922.

Stay tuned for next month's Part 3 of Crafting Your Perfect Native Plant Landscape, in which we employ our newfound knowledge of landscape characteristics and design elements and learn more about specific native plant species we can choose from and what conservation and aesthetic goals they can achieve. For additional resources, expertise, and support pertaining to native plants and other natural resource conservation topics, including farm and forest planning, alternative stormwater management, and more, contact the Whidbey Island Conservation District for free, voluntary conservation planning assistance from our staff at 888-678-4922 or by visiting [www.whidbeycd.org](http://www.whidbeycd.org).

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