

Plants – Enhance Your Community!

Important Resources ...

The character of a community is established, in large part, by its natural environment – especially the plant communities that occupy it. Pines in the Southeast, cypress trees in Florida, redwoods on the West Coast, palm trees in Southern California, and deciduous forests in the Northeast all provide the background of communities in those regions.

How does a planner know what plants are best? Which plants should you establish in different situations? Which plants can tolerate extreme environmental conditions such as wetlands or deserts? Which plants enhance wildlife habitat? Which species have good drought tolerance, insect resistance, or disease resistance?

There are a multitude of resources that assist planners in selecting plants for their adaptation to different situations and management requirements. Planners can also check the recommendations of consultants that their community hires.

A valuable nationwide resource is the PLANTS database maintained by the USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at <http://plants.usda.gov>. The PLANTS database contains information on whether a plant is native to the United States or not, the states and counties where it occurs, its wetland



indicator status and wildlife habitat value, and dozens of other characteristics such as height, tolerance to saline and alkaline conditions, and the practical means of propagation.

NRCS (www.nrcs.usda.gov) also assists landowners in managing their land properly to optimize production without polluting the water and air. The agency develops conservation plans with farmers and ranchers to assist them in raising crops without excess erosion, grazing forages without damaging the forage plants, and using agricultural waste to fertilize crops without polluting the water.

The agency also has a plant materials program (<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov>) that selects plants and develops establishment and management techniques to conserve soil and water resources and provide forage for livestock. The program tests plants at plant materials centers distributed



throughout the country and on private lands under “real life” conditions. The program also employs plant materials specialists who educate both the public and commercial seed and plant growers. Plants developed in the program are released to commercial seed and plant growers for propagation and sale to the public.

In addition, the Cooperative Extension Service offers assistance on the selection and management of plants as landscape trees, shrubs, groundcovers, and turf; as well as plants for food and livestock forage. The Cooperative Extension Service is the local extension of each state’s land grant university and they have offices in every county in the country. The land grant universities teach and conduct research on the establishment and management of plants; as well as soil science, food science, animal husbandry, forestry, and wildlife management. Most land grant universities are named after the name of the state; such as Penn State, Washington State, the University of Florida. A few are not named after the state; such as Rutgers in New Jersey, Cornell in New York, Clemson in South Carolina, and Auburn in Alabama.

Also, there are specialized kinds of plant culture that can enhance a community. Green roofs (www.greenroofs.com) are roofs on which gardens of grasses and wildflowers have been established. The gardens

mitigate the “heat island” effects of developed areas. The roofs must be constructed to support the weight of the rooftop gardens, while the plants must be grown in conditions that minimize the weight of their growth media and containers. Plants that can withstand heat and drought stress and grow with shallow root systems must be selected.

Another specialized kind of plant culture is practiced in rain gardens (<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/water/wm/nps/rg>). Rain gardens are collections of plants established on soil that is permeable enough to allow infiltration of rain runoff from lawns, roofs, and pavement into the groundwater. Rain garden sites must be porous enough to allow infiltration. Plants that will tolerate the droughty conditions on the porous soil but also tolerate periodic flooding when runoff accumulates in the garden after it rains should be selected.

All of these websites provide outstanding and free information aimed at helping design communities suited to their environments.

**Visit the PLANTS
database at:**

<http://plants.usda.gov/>

