

Planning Your Garden in the Winter

Winter may not be a good time for planting, but it is certainly the right time for planning.

Why native plants and why plan a garden in the winter?

Challenges we face in the Hopewell Valley include our “sour” land conditions, fluctuations in weather and either too much water or too little water. To minimize the impact of these problems, a plan should focus on plants adapted to the climate and soil conditions that naturally occur here. What we are looking for are plants that have developed over thousands of years in our Hopewell Valley ecosystem. Known as native plants, they have the additional benefit of providing necessary food and shelter for native birds, butterflies, beneficial insects and other wildlife.

One of the more recent challenges we face in Hopewell is the Emerald Ash Borer. Everywhere you look around the Hopewell Valley, ash trees are dying or dead due to the Emerald Ash Borer. This past summer’s drought damaged many lawns and stressed or killed landscapes. The previous years’ hurricanes left some yards underwater and flooded many basements. These rough few years have many people feeling a bit overwhelmed or defeated. Fortunately, properly planning what and where you plant can help with these challenges. We should be looking at this as an opportunity. An opportunity to learn about native plants and ecological restoration of our properties to enhance our community’s biodiversity, reduce runoff and flooding, increase groundwater recharge for our drinking water, clean our air, increase carbon sequestration, and many, many other social, economic, and environmental benefits.

In the Hopewell Valley, over 15% of the trees were ash and 99% of those ash trees are expected to be gone. That leaves us with a lot of ash holes. What will go in their place? If lawn is your answer, then you may find yourself with flooding issues. Those trees drank up a lot of water. A lawn on the other hand, with its very shallow root system, does little to help stormwater soak into the ground. Even if you plant replacement trees, it will take a long time for them to catch up to the water absorption of mature ash trees. That means additional plantings or a rain garden may need to be part of your plan.

The gaps left by ash trees are things to consider this winter when thinking about adding native plants to your yard. Two other things to consider are 1. Can I replace my nonnative plants in my garden beds with native plants? 2. Are there unused/rarely used portions of my yard that I convert to native plants? Many of us have these areas on our property that we mow week in and week out for little to no usage. Here are some of the ways unused mowed areas are a detriment to our community and environment:

- They are “ecological desserts” that provide little to no biodiversity.
- They don’t provide the habitat and nutrition our native flora and fauna require.
- Many non-native plants aren’t adapted to our environment and that leads to intensive watering which reduces groundwater recharge depleting our groundwater drinking supply.
- These unused mowed areas lead to increased surface runoff from rain events (in comparison with a native plant garden) leading to flooding and property damage.
- Many of us water our unused portions of the yard potentially leading to a depletion of our groundwater supply which could impact our community's drinking water availability.

- The societal, ecological, and economic problems of mowed areas are extensive. The list of items above include just some of the problems with maintained turf grass yards.

Resources for native plants and native gardening

Which native plants are a good fit for my yard? Winter is a fantastic time to analyze your property and figure out what plants will be best suited for your yard and your native plant goals. Resources such as [“Jersey Friendly Yard Database”](https://www.jerseyyards.org/plant/) (<https://www.jerseyyards.org/plant/>) are available to find the best native plants for your yard. On this database, you can filter your property conditions, plant types, deer resistance, light requirements, etc. to find plants that work best for your yard. Just make sure you choose “Native Plants Only”.

Where can I buy native plants? You can research “native plant nurseries near me” or “native plants for sale online”. Even better, you can take the guessing out of the equation and join the Facebook group [“Hopewell, NJ Native Plant Swap”](#) which keeps an extensive list of local nurseries, landscaping businesses, non-profits, and online nurseries to make your search easier. “Hopewell, NJ Native Plant Swap” also has a community of several hundred members that offer plants up for free! Another great option for getting native plants is winter sowing. Winter sowing allows you to grow your own native plants from seed in mini greenhouses such as milk jugs. Local non-profits like [“Sourland Conservancy”](#) and [“Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space”](#) (FoHVOS) and native plant facebook groups like “Hopewell, NJ Native Plant Swap” organize winter sowing workshops to help people grow their own native plants, dramatically reducing the cost of native plants. There are a lot of winter sowing tutorials on YouTube as well.

Pints, quarts, gallons, plugs, seeds. Which size should I buy?

You can pretty much buy all native plants in different container sizes. They are typically pints, quarts, gallons, plugs, or seeds. What size you buy is dependent on your personal preference and your garden goals. Your typical pint container size plants or larger are available at your local nurseries. These plants are typically full grown and produce large blooms in their first year. In comparison to plugs, they are more expensive. Plugs can typically only be purchased from online nurseries. These plants are smaller and will not get full-sized until the following season(s). These plants are usually much cheaper per plant which means you can get more for your money and plant more densely which reduces competition from weeds. Seeds are the cheapest option but require more patience and you will need to know what to look for (Is that the plant I planted? Or is it a weed?). If you're gardening in a smaller area, larger plant sizes from local nurseries might work for you. If you are doing a larger area, plugs or seeds might be the best option to keep costs down and be able to plant densely to outcompete nonnative weeds. Of course, you can always combine and purchase various sizes. The winter is a great time to plan what size area you want to add native plants to and this can help guide you towards the correct size plants you buy.

What to expect from your new native plants/garden

When you do plant something, you won't see much growth in the first year as the planting's energy goes into establishing a root system. This is especially true if you plant plugs and/or seeds. The first year they sleep, the second year they creep and the third year they leap is a popular adage that applies to trees,

shrubs or perennials. In the second year you'll see some growth but much of the energy is still used to build a more resilient root system. It's the third year where growth takes off and the plantings are much better able to survive on their own. A plan should include monitoring the amount of rainfall and the possibility for some supplemental watering, especially for trees, until the root systems are established. Once you get past the third year, if you've used natives, the plantings should be well adapted to survive on their own.

Local resources to assist in planning and adding native plants to your yard

Jersey Friendly Yards (www.jerseyyards.org) and their Interactive Yard tool is a great online resource to learn about environmentally sound landscaping techniques which can be integrated into your plan. The Sourland Conservancy has [stewardship videos](https://sourland.org/stewardshops/) (<https://sourland.org/stewardshops/>) that help you transform your lawn into a native garden, provide videos on winter sowing, and many more native plant resources. For my family (Mark Bean), it was the Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space (www.fohvos.org) and their Community Conservation program that helped us on our journey. We started in 2016 with the conversion of a 1-acre stormwater detention basin into a native grass and wildflower meadow. In the years since, we've gradually transformed other sections of our 2-acre property to include a butterfly garden, a bird garden, a rain garden, two mini meadows and many native plantings. Our property, now named Flutter By Meadows, has beautiful blooms from Spring through Fall. What was once mostly lawn now provides us with countless hours of enjoyment due to the birds, butterflies and other visitors who depend on the habitats that the native plants provide. A problem with water in our basement was mitigated with the addition of a rain garden. The lawns we converted to meadows now only need to be cut once a year. Our established plantings remained healthy and vibrant when the lawns around us turned brown and brittle in the drought. You can see and read about it all at www.flutterbymeadows.com.

Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space can help you get started on devising your plan. Their Residential Community Conservation program is a free service available to FoHVOS members. Their expert staff will do a 1 to 2 hour visit to your property and offer guidance for enhancing the natural beauty and ecological value of your land. Another important member benefit is access to native plants at wholesale prices through twice-yearly native plant sales. Spring plant orders start February 24th and are due by March 6th for pickup in Hopewell on May 19th and 20th. If you find yourself struggling with what to plant we'll connect you with the Director of Stewardship, Mike Van Clef, who can provide suggestions for dry shade, moist shade, pollinator meadows, etc. Now is the time to get planning on what and how you are going to plant. As you create your new native plant habitats, consider adding your property to "[Homegrown National Park](https://homegrownnationalpark.org/)" (<https://homegrownnationalpark.org/>)

List of local resources for native plants and gardening

- [Sourland Conservancy](https://sourland.org/)
 - <https://sourland.org/>
- [Friends of Hopewell Valley Space / FoHVOS](https://www.fohvos.info/)
 - <https://www.fohvos.info/>
- [Hopewell, NJ Native Plant Swap](#)

- [Flutter by Meadow](#)
 - www.flutterbymeadows.com
- [Jersey Friendly Yards](#)
 - <https://www.jerseyyards.org/>

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