have been gardening professionally in the Pacific Northwest for nearly 30 years and have seen horticultural fashion trends come and go. After a few extremely dry years, a Mediterranean plant trend arose, and—after a few mild winters—a desire for a lush tropicalismo. Both of these movements have had lasting effects on how we make gardens here, but nothing has stood the test of time like the use of native plants.

This shouldn’t be surprising, because our region is home to many beautiful, garden-worthy natives. What’s more, these plants are adapted to our climate and provide optimal food and habitat for native wildlife, which most gardeners deeply appreciate. There are the stalwarts, such as salal, sword fern and vine maple, which once formed dense stands in the original forests that grew in the Puget Basin and are highly prized by landscapers for their amazing versatility. I have planted a fair number of them over the years, finding them useful, easy and lovely. But there are plenty of other natives that I have grown especially fond of as garden plants over the years.

For ideas, I look to a wide variety of our regionally native ecosystems. There seems to be an inclination among native plant gardeners to focus mainly on woodland natives, perhaps as a gesture to the once “original forest.” However, the notion that a single, great, continuous old-growth forest covered our region in pre-colonial times is not accurate. Historically, the forests here were in various stages of succession, some regenerating from burns and others hosting 500-year-old mammoth conifers. There were also prairies, deciduous forests, wet meadows, bogs, swamps, and even remnant oak savannahs—and all were touched by human hands well before the Europeans ever arrived.

Our gardens, too, are a kind of patchwork of “ecosystems” or at least sites with varying microclimates—dry and shady, wet and sunny, and so on. We can look beyond forest habitats to find native plants that better suit some of these sites and, by doing so, broaden our palette and enhance the diversity of our gardens.

Native Plants for Different Microclimates
I recently took on a new gardening client. The five-acre estate is immaculately groomed and dominated by a meandering colonnade of Douglas firs, hemlocks and western red cedar. There are hundreds of rhododendrons, too—and some heather, camellias and viburnums, and many, many (way too many) Spiraea ‘Magic Carpet’. But, as I walked the property, I found only one sword fern, a clump of sheared salal and a scraggly patch of Oregon grape. I immediately
began forming a list in my mind of native plants to add to the garden.

Since the garden is already heavily planted with trees and shrubs, there is very little room for adding any more large, woody plants. So, I focused on plants of modest size, appropriate for most urban gardens.

Several opportunities and challenges presented themselves: The garden includes areas of dry shade under towering conifers and a deep swale in partial shade that stays quite wet. There is also an open, sunny area with average soil and an area with wet, well-drained soils under Japanese maples, along the edge of a heavily watered lawn.

Following are some of the plants I’m considering for these four different areas. My approach is inspired by Arthur Kruckeberg, who—in his seminal book, “Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest”—recommends that “Good taste and an ecological eye should be the prime arbiters in growing native plants in people-oriented environments and landscapes.”

**Dry-Shade Conifer Zone**
The base of a conifer tree is a tough spot for plants to grow, due to the lack of light and the competition with tree roots for moisture and space. At the same time, I think the earth looks too bald with nothing growing at the base of a tree, so I like to use foolproof plants that are adapted to these tough conditions.

Myrtle boxwood (*Pachistima myrsinites*) is a wide-ranging understory shrub from western North America. In the Pacific Northwest, it prefers drier areas and is an ideal candidate for the base of our towering conifers. In appearance, it is quite close to boxwood or Japanese holly, but it bears small, red flowers. I planted some at the base of a fir tree in another client’s garden, and they are doing great, despite having never been watered in 18 years!

Evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) is another fine shrub I plant again and again for its versatility; lustrous, fine-textured foliage; pretty flowers; and tasty berries. It does well in a woodland garden setting, where it can take the shade and root competition of larger trees with
minimal irrigation. Over time, it can grow over 10 feet tall. I have seen the plant sheared to form a hedge, though I would not recommend doing this.

Inside-out flower (Vancouveria hexandra) has a delicacy that belies its toughness. Everything about this plant says grace, from the dainty, epimedium-like white flowers in late spring to the small, ivy-like leaves that seem to hover above the ground on their wiry stalks. Like inside-out flower, false Solomon’s seal (Maianthemum racemosum) is another forest ephemeral with a long period of interest. It puts on a great show, from the first emergence of its arching stems of oval foliage in early spring to the appearance of its plummy, white flower clusters in late spring to the red berries that form in late summer.

Its cousin, false lily-of-the-valley (Maianthemum dilatatum), is a lovely groundcover with spikes of delicate, white spring flowers. The glossy, heart-shaped leaves emerge in early spring and persist into fall. Tough as nails, it spreads where everything else sulks.

The creeping, rhizomatous Oregon woodsorrel (Oxalis oregana) forms an aggressive carpet beneath conifers. Some gardeners decline to use the plant for that reason, but I find its spreading ability in this situation an asset. Its velvety, shamrock-like leaves and cup-shaped lilac flowers are nice features, too. The evergreen cultivar ‘Klamath Ruby’ is a fine garden plant, whether you consider it a proper native or not.

**Wet, Shaded Swale**

Wet soil, though often seen as a limitation, has such potential for bringing lushness and drama into a garden. A number of large, attractive herbaceous perennials native to stream banks, seeps, marshes, and wet forest sites in the Pacific Northwest are perfect for achieving this effect.

With its one- to two-foot-wide leaves, Indian rhubarb (Darmera peltata) lends a bold, almost-tropical look to any wet place in a Northwest garden. The showy, pink flowers emerge on long stalks in spring before the foliage.
Riverbank lupine (*Lupinus rivularis*) is that rare lupine that actually takes moist-to-wet soils. It is multi-branching and likes to sprawl, filling in large areas. In mid-spring, it sends up stalks of long-lasting, purplish flowers that are magnets for bees.

Scouler’s corydalis (*Corydalis scouleri*) is a perennial I grow as much for its tall (up to three feet high), succulent, ferny foliage as its clusters of pink flowers. The plant is a bit of a runner, but plays well with others. Oregon goldthread (*Coptis laciniata*) is another plant I grow as much for its ferny foliage as its attractive, spidery, white spring flowers. Even more interesting are the space-age seedpods, arrayed in a whorl around the top of each stem.

Giant chain fern (*Woodwardia fimbriata*) is a choice and dramatically large, evergreen fern. Its lance-shaped fronds can reach over six feet long! I think it will be a good companion for the other tropical-looking plants in the swale. Speaking of large plants, goat’s beard (*Aruncus dioicus*) is like a giant astilbe; its spikes of cream-colored flowers can reach up to six feet tall. The softness of its ferny, drooping foliage is very elegant.

Slough sedge (*Carex obnupta*) is a bit aggressive for the average-size garden, but it is such a nice-looking plant that I can’t resist. It adds a wild-grass edge to any pond or swale, and it stays green—even during the driest spells.

**Open, Sunny Zone**

I have become more and more enamored with the South Puget Sound prairies over the years. The experimental restoration plots at Glacial Heritage Preserve look like gardens to me. I wonder why so few of these plants make it into our ornamental displays.

For a prairie planting, it’s good to start off with some grasses. Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*) is a widespread perennial bunch grass from western North America. Very drought tolerant, it produces dense tufts of short, bluish-green leaves and makes a great companion for low-growing perennials. Tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*) is another attractive native bunch grass with graceful, open flower panicles.
For taller perennials, I think I’d like to feature large-leaved lupine (*Lupinus polyphyllus*), which is one of the showiest and easiest of the 75 or so native lupines in our region. Its spires of blue-to-purple summer flowers reach up to four feet tall, and the plant seeds in freely, too.

I’ll also have to mix in some Douglas iris (*Iris douglasiana*); it’s the best of our native irises! Its nice, strappy evergreen foliage looks good all year. The spring flowers, which come in various shades of violet, are a lovely surprise.

In the shorter-perennial department, sea thrift (*Armeria maritima*) is a lovely, compact evergreen that looks almost grass-like when not in flower. It makes a great edging plant. The long-lasting, knobby heads of pink flowers in spring make it a choice addition to any garden.

Early blue violet (*Viola adunca*) is a very drought-tolerant and lovely member of the viola clan. Growing among taller plants, it is very happy to bloom early and vanish in the summer. Broad-leafed stonecrop (*Sedum spathulifolium*) is a compact evergreen perennial with waxy, gray foliage and yellow flowers on stout, reddish stems. Though diminutive, it has a very strong presence.

Moist, Deciduous Shade Zone
The conditions in this area seem almost ideal for gardening, as a combination of good drainage and plenty of water is hard to come by. Throw in the shade of deciduous trees, and it becomes something precious.

Oak fern (*Gymnocarpium disjunctum*) is a delicate, carpet-forming deciduous fern. I look forward to its emergence from the forest duff each spring. Roundleaf alumroot (*Heuchera cylindrica*) is not your store-bought, day-glow-colored heuchera. With its maple-like, dark-green leaves and tall spikes of white summer flowers, it has an understated, dignified beauty.

Pacific azalea (*Rhododendron occidentale*) is the loveliest of the three rhododendrons native to western North America. It is deciduous, and in addition to lovely, fragrant, white or pale-pink spring flowers, it has brilliant fall color.

Western bleeding heart (*Dicentra formosa*) likes to spread around and has a bit of a reputation for being aggressive—but it’s nothing that a little elbow grease and pulling can’t keep under control. And the effort is totally worth it for the lovely, pink-to-purple, heart-shaped flowers all spring—and for the ferny foliage.

Red columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*) is not as weedy at its European garden counterparts, but every bit as lovely—and it is a great attractor of hummingbirds. Pacific trillium (*Trillium ovatum*), though ephemeral—as most spring-blooming forest dwellers are in our native flora—is a great beauty, with its yellow-centered white flowers on foot-high stalks. It’s easy to propagate and, contrary to popular belief, does quite fine in the dry understory of conifers.

In conclusion, this is hardly a definitive selection of natives. I haven’t yet talked about long-leaved Oregon grape (*Berberis nervosa*) or fringe-cup (*Tellima grandiflora*) or one of my favorite shrubs: wavy-leafed silk tassel (*Garrya elliptica*). Or the miniscule American parsley fern (*Cryptogramma acrostichoides*). Or any of the orchids. (There are 14 native to our region.) Or the bulbs. Or the asters... Or...

As you can see, I could go on until I nearly exhaust the native flora of the Pacific Northwest. We may have only begun to imagine what a native garden might be.

Daniel Mount is an estate gardener, garden writer, and member of the “Bulletin” Editorial Board. He lives on a small farm in the Snoqualmie Valley. Read more of his reflections on plants and gardening at www.mountgardens.com.

ERRATUM:
The article “Lost in Translation” in the Spring 2017 issue of the “Bulletin” erroneously stated that Daniel Mount’s trip to Japan was organized by the Hardy Fern Foundation. The trip was actually organized by Kazuo Tsuchiya of Japan Specialized Group Tours.