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GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS | JODY MORGAN

## GARDENING WITH THE MASTERS: Native Plants are Different

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Morgan



Spiranthes (Lady Tresses) has tiny orchid-shaped flowers spiraling up the stem.

NSCU Cooperative Extension Plant Tool Box

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I began gardening in 1991 as a newlywed. My husband and I loved our new hobby together, we wanted more land for more gardens. We moved onto an acre in Cherokee County. As I looked for plants, my frustration grew. I wanted something different. I wanted something more than the plant nurseries and big box stores were offering.

I asked sales people. I talked to plant nursery workers. Their definition of different was offering me carnivorous plants. Carnivorous plants weren't the different I was looking for. My background is with computers, not plants. I didn't know how to articulate 'different' to the plant nurseries or big box stores.



Twenty-six years later, my husband and I attended a native plant conference. I knew nothing about native plants. I wasn't sure we should be there. The native plant conference offered hikes in between the presentation days. We like hiking. So why not? The first native plant I saw in person was red bee balm. The petals curve at the edges and there are filaments scattered amongst the petals. I found my different!

There were six native plant vendors at the conference. I only bought 13 plants that year. Any gardener knows walking into a plant sale to watch out. Every plant is coming home with me!

I am still learning about native plants. Some native plants resemble weeds. Some look like aliens. Some native plants are normal looking. All are different from the ornamental, exotic plants offered for our landscapes.

Let's examine bee balm, rattlesnake master, and spiranthes. Each of these plants is a flowering perennial, feeds numerous pollinators and is native in Cherokee County.

Bee balm's Latin genus is *Monarda*. Bee balm has 59 recognized species. Bee balm's bloom resembles fireworks. The petals fold in a curling motion at the edges, while the edges contain two scallops. There are filaments also extending out of the center of the bloom. The bloom comes in red, white, light purple, and pink. Part of the mint family,

bee balm grows four to five feet in height with the bloom erupting at the top of the stalk. Bee balm does not have a particular host insect but is extremely important as a nectar source for all insects.

Rattlesnake master's Latin name is *Eryngium yuccifolium*. Rattlesnake master has three recognized varieties. Rattlesnake master's bloom is a spherical flower head consisting of dense aggregations of tiny white flowers. The plant has yucca like leaves. Rattlesnake master can reach a height of five feet and looks like it belongs in a desert instead of southeast America. Rattlesnake master is a host plant for the rattlesnake master borer moth. Insects and pollinators rely on rattlesnake master for nectar.

*Spiranthes* is the Latin name for Lady Tresses, a group of native orchids. There are 32 accepted varieties of *Spiranthes*. The blooms are tiny orchid-shaped flowers spiraling up the stem. The blooms are smaller than your pinky nail. *Spiranthes* grow to two feet tall.

All these native plants are flowering perennials. Bee balm and rattlesnake master have crossed into the commercial nursery plant trade and can be found at stores or online. *Spiranthes* has not crossed into the commercial nursery plant trade. Each plant feeds numerous pollinators. These plants are part of the 7,000-8,000 known native plants to the southeast.

Native plants are low maintenance, contain long roots, and support local wildlife and insects. Native plants have evolved over thousands of years to survive in our soil requiring no fertilizer. Native plant roots are longer than non-native plants. The longer roots absorb more stormwater runoff and can survive longer periods of drought. Native plants provide both food and shelter for local wildlife and insects.

Native plants can provide the same aesthetic as ornamental plants with a little gardening research and planning. Native plants can be propagated like ornamental plants. Native plants provide similar horticultural value as ornamental plants with additional ecological benefits. Native plants supply the same landscape functions as ornamental plants. Consider native plants for your yard. Happy Gardening !!!

Jody Morgan is one of many UGA Master Gardener Extension Volunteers of Cherokee County. For more information or questions contact the Cherokee County Extension Office at 770-721-7803 or for upcoming seminars follow us at [www.facebook.com/cherokeemastergardeners](http://www.facebook.com/cherokeemastergardeners) or at [cherokeemastergardeners.com](http://cherokeemastergardeners.com).

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