

How to ... plant a native garden

Our forests and wildlife have a lot to contend with: drought, climate change, pest animals and plants, disease, bushfires, clear felling and changes to landscape from agriculture, industry and road building.

Phew, it's a bit of a tough gig for our biodiversity. But we can all help our forests and wildlife by providing safe places for them to live, breed and be merry. Planting a native garden at home is a brilliant way to provide habitats for plants and animals in your area.



You could even try to link it up with other existing patches of native vegetation, so that your patch forms a part of a wildlife corridor.

Start planning your garden with the four P's:

1. Purpose: A native garden needs careful planning and will need to be cared for. Is your native school garden being built for educational purposes, appearance, or both? Do you want shade trees or trees that serve as a windbreak?

2. People: Is there a local garden group that might be willing to offer time or advice? Do your friends, family or neighbours have some plants in their garden that are already thriving that they may be able to donate? Or can they lend some equipment or a spare pair of hands to get the garden started and necessary landscaping taken care of.

3. Place: Even if you're starting with a bare patch of ground, its north/south orientation, slope and size will determine much of what you can do. Take note of factors such as shade versus exposure to the sun, frost potential, wind levels, rainfall and nearby poisonous insecticide storage facilities. When you head to your nursery for advice, they'll be able to recommend plants that suit your unique site.

4. Plants: Don't 'source' your plants in the middle of the night from a national park: it's illegal and they're already doing their job. If you have the time consider taking a trip to a local national park prior to remodeling your garden to find out how native plants work as an ecosystem.

If you decide you want to attract native birds and butterflies keep in mind that the flowering plants that attract these animals will probably also attract bees, which may be of concern if there are young children around.

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Start gardening!

Despite being hardy and able to thrive almost anywhere, native plants still need well-drained, healthy soil. Remove all weeds from the site but leave behind any logs or rocks that could be used as shelter by native animals and insects.

Turn the soil where you want to do the planting, digging at least 6 inches into the ground. Your plants will most probably need watering during their establishment phase and will benefit from soil conditioning. Stick with products labeled 'Australian native plant food' or use organic fertiliser such as blood and bone, or pelletised chicken manure.



When you begin planting, start with biggest plants first then move to down in size. It's important to ensure that there is enough room for each plant once it's mature. Dig a hole bigger than needed for the roots of the plant, place the plant in the hole and then backfill and firm the soil as you go. Remember to encourage deep rooting by giving plenty of water when you first plant.

Mulching is important to retain soil moisture and to discourage weeds. Wood chips or bark from an Australian native tree are great as long as you don't cut down the tree to get the chips in the first place.

There is, unfortunately, no such thing as a 'no maintenance garden' even when planting natives (well there is but it's technically called a desert). The good news is that this is a great way to get the kids involved (consider a roster), even if they haven't been part of the planting process.

1. Watering – Aim for infrequent, deep watering to encourage deep and strong rooting. Young trees will benefit from watering in their early years. You might want to install two drip-line irrigation systems on either side of a row of trees to ensure even watering. Consider installing a rainwater tank or collecting grey water for the garden, this is a great way to counter water restrictions and avoid being lynched.

2. Fertiliser – add fertiliser during spring and autumn.

3. Pruning – even natives will benefit from more pruning than the local possums can offer so aim to cut back by a third after the plants have flowered.

Visit Sustainable Gardening Australia (www.sgaonline.org.au) for more tips on planting your native garden, tips on plants, and links to native nurseries in your state.

For more information on how you can help our environment, or to make some suggestions of your own, please go to www.coolaustralia.org