

As plant catalogues fill mailboxes over the next few weeks and months, so will plans for new or expanded gardens fill the minds of garden enthusiasts. Most gardeners see these catalogues as inspiration, although some also find them frustrating. Over time gardening interests change and new jargon is introduced to explain these trends in plants and products. Sometimes this new terminology leads to debate over the true meaning of the terms. Two such terms of frequent gardening debate are “native” and “xeriscape.”

At first glance, there seems to be an obvious definition for “native plants.” With further thought come the questions. How long does a plant have to be living in its environment to be considered a “native”? Does “native” mean better?

By most definitions a plant “native” to North America is one that occurred in our environment prior to European settlement. Generally, a native species is one that grows in the region in which it evolved, and as such tends to be well suited to the rainfall, drought and frost cycles that its local community might experience. At the same time natives are less likely to invade new habitats.

This does not necessarily mean that natives are “better” than alien species, those that were either accidentally or purposefully introduced to a region outside of their native habitat. Actually, many alien species are well suited for their “new” environment, and provide many benefits such as landscape and garden interest and food. Unfortunately, with alien species there is great potential for them to spread unchecked. Their new environments may lack the climatic and biological controls that would have kept them contained in their native habitat, thus increasing the possibility that they will out-compete other plants and negatively alter the ecosystem. To avoid this potential, it is important to either stick with native plants or use only improved introduced alien species that have a proven record of success in a particular environment.

If you have interest in learning more about utilizing native plants in your garden, the Virginia Native Plant Society is an excellent source of information. This organization aims to protect endangered plant species by preserving habitats. They can be found on the internet at www.vnps.org.

Another gardening term that can be perplexing, yet is now quite commonly used is “xeriscape.” Many people think of rocks and sand and cacti when they hear this term. This vision of “xeriscape” most certainly stems from its origin at Denver Water, where a consortium of Denver Water staff and professionals in the landscape industry coined the term. As Denver is a desert climate, many believe that a landscaping style developed there must include these stark elements.

The term is actually defined as “water conservation through creative landscaping.” Plants that are referred to as “xeric” or “xeriscape plantings” are simply plants that are well suited for use in a water conserving landscape.

Depending on the variety, many native and improved alien plant species could be considered good xeriscape plants.

A xeriscape itself is a landscape that was designed following seven basic principles: planning and design; improving the soil; efficient irrigation; reduced turf areas; selecting appropriate plant material; mulching; and proper maintenance. By definition, many gardeners have already unknowingly created xeriscapes in their own backyards.

For more information about xeriscaping and its origins, visit the Xeriscape Colorado! Inc. website at www.xeriscape.org.

Never let the jargon get in the way of gardening enjoyment. Expanding your knowledge of the growing trends of gardening will only fuel your interests in creating beautiful, living and lasting spaces that are environmentally sound.