

COUNTERPOINT: A different look at Lurie Gardens

By Charlotte Adelman

Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park calls itself a "model of responsible horticulture, providing a healthy habitat for a wide variety of plants and wildlife." Lurie is justifiably proud that it is chemical free and that it provides some shelter to certain wildlife. But its model is missing an opportunity to promote the use of native plants.

I am a Chicago-area resident who has often visited and examined the contents of Lurie Garden, so I am knowledgeable about what grows there. I also know how to identify native Midwestern plants, and I know a fair amount about how to distinguish native species from introduced species and nativars, which are cultivars of native species. And, when Lurie Garden's listings show single quotation marks around names like 'October Skies,' 'Aphrodite' and 'Purple Bush,' to name a few, that should ring nativar alarm bells for people committed to gardening and landscaping with true, straight native plants.

The public relations arm of Lurie Garden has persuaded many Chicago residents that it "plays an important role in demonstrating how gardeners can sustainably, naturally and cost-effectively maintain a beautiful native garden in the region's climate" with native plants occupying "nearly 60 percent of the garden," according to a 2012 [Chicagoland blog](#). However, native plant information varies on Lurie's website. Its [fact sheet](#) states Lurie holds "222 total species, cultivars and selections (40.5 percent native to North America, and 26.1 percent native to Illinois)." Yet the sustainability page of its [website](#) states: "You will find 20 types of grasses, 26 types of trees and shrubs, 34 types of bulbs, and 142 types of perennial herbaceous plants within the borders of Lurie Garden. Ninety (40.5 percent) of these plants are native to North America and 26.1 percent (58) are native to Illinois." In addition, according to the [Millennium Park Foundation website](#), which is associated with the garden, "Filled with more than 240 varieties – all perennials – approximately 65 percent of the Lurie Garden's species are native to North America, some to Illinois."

However, in terms of numbers of actual plants, including each of the approximately 140,000 individually "planted by hand" bulbs, the numbers must reach far greater percentages of nonnative plants.

This brings us to nativars, a subject that Wild Ones has a very clear position. "There are just too many unknowns in the process of breeding nativars," states the blog, [Lawanda's Garden](#), citing Wild Ones in noting that nativars are not native plants. Those possible concerns include loss of wildlife and pollinator habitat, increase in allergies to pollen or other impacts on human health, the potential of increasing invasive species, an unpredictable response to climate change, higher maintenance costs for gardeners, and an economic loss to native species growers.

After looking at Lurie Garden's [plant lists](#), it appears that Lurie defines its nativars as native species. Nineteen of Lurie's perennial native herbaceous plants are nativars and thus not native to North America. Further, six of its alleged native grasses are nativars. Two of its "native" shoulder hedge plants are nativars. Three of its "native" Extrusion Plaza plants are nativars. One of its "native" trees is a nativar. And a new addition is also a nativar. Assuming that Lurie's percentage of North American natives includes Illinois natives, the math suggests that about 60 percent of Lurie's perennial herbaceous plant species are not native to North America.

Even when a plant is "native" to North America, when it comes from so far away that its location has nothing in common with the Midwest, there's a lot to be skeptical about. Wild Ones recommends against planting North American plants that are from inappropriate locations. Yet, Lurie touts *Sanguisorba menziesii*, commonly called Alaskan Burnet but simply called burnet by Lurie Garden. This native is part of the far north's ecological world and provides little or nothing to the ecological world in which Chicago-area plants and wildlife evolved and still live.

Lurie Garden presents itself as serving a "palette of texture and color" composed of long-lasting perennials and thousands of gorgeously colored bulbs. What the garden ignores, however, is the vast majority of this texture and color comes from Eurasia and is alien to Midwestern wildlife.

Lurie Garden's plant choices transport visitors to a designed landscape that can never be seen in nature. Lurie Garden is beautiful to view; however, it is not a healthy habitat for a wide variety of native plants and wildlife. ❀

CHARLOTTE ADELMAN, a retired attorney, is co-author of "The Midwestern Native Garden: Native Alternatives to Nonnative Flowers and Plants" and the recently released "Midwestern Native Shrubs and Trees, Gardening Alternatives to Nonnative Species, An Illustrated Guide." Adelman is a lifetime member of Wild Ones with the North Park Village Nature Center Chapter.



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