

Great Plants for the Great Plains

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For release, Week of January 30

Selecting plants that are different from others plants can be challenging but rewarding. It can be challenging because garden centers, being good business people, tend to carry what customers ask for. Customers, being good consumers, tend to ask for plants they are familiar with and like.

This works well with most products, but can lead to issues with landscape plants. When we overplant one type of plant, a monoculture is developed. In nature and our landscapes, diversity is best. Monocultures lead to increased insect or disease problems.

We currently see numerous disease issues with Colorado Blue spruce and will be seeing many ash trees dying due to a combination of pests and overplanting. In the past, we lost most of our American elms from Dutch elm disease and overplanting.

If adding a new tree, shrub or perennial to your landscape this spring, think diversity. For some ideas, consider Great Plants for the Great Plains or ask garden center retailers what is something different they carry and would recommend.

The Great Plants program, part of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, has been promoting plants to grow in Nebraska for 24 years. The 2023 Great Plants are shingle oak, “Tor” birchleaf Spirea, Korean pine, 'Iron Butterfly' ironweed and Blue Zinger sedge.

Shingle oak, *Quercus imbricaria*, is native to the Midwest. It is relatively fast growing, adaptable to varied growing conditions, and drought tolerant. There is one growing in Pawnee park in Columbus. A low maintenance site where the tree only receives natural precipitation.

Its leaves are narrow and smooth edged, not lobed, and shiny and leathery. Fall color is yellow-brown to russet-red and leaves often persist on the tree through winter. Due to strong wood, the up to 40-foot tall shingle oaks are tolerant of windswept sites and can resist ice storm damage.

‘Tor’ Birchleaf spirea, *Spirea betulifolia*, is a two to three-foot tall, rounded shrub. Its small, flat clusters of tiny white flowers attract pollinators in late spring. In fall, the dark green, birch-like leaves change to reddish-orange. This shrub prefers moist, well-drained soil and full sun. It is deer-resistant and, if needed, can be cut back dramatically after flowering. I have a couple in my landscape that have had some dieback I’ve needed to trim out in spring.

Korean pine, *Pinus koraiensis*, grows best on well-drained, moist sites but tolerates a wide range of soil conditions from sandy to clay. It will not do well on poorly drained, wet sites. This cold hardy, 30 to 50-foot tall evergreen has a narrow pyramidal form when young, then develops a looser, rounded form with age. The 3 to 6-inch long cones contain edible seeds that can be harvested and eaten as pine nuts. Todd Faller, an area nurseryman who has grown and tested numerous evergreens, recommends the cultivar ‘Silveray’ which has silver-blue, long, twisted needles.

'Iron Butterfly' ironweed is a perennial with bright purple, long-lasting flowers from mid to late summer. They attract hummingbirds, butterflies, bees and other pollinators. Ironweed plants are two to three feet tall and wide, with narrow leaves. They prefer full sun and medium to dry, well-drained soil.

Blue zinger sedge, *Carex flacca*, is evergreen and does best in medium to wet soil in part shade to full sun. It will tolerate dry shade. The attractive 2 to 3-foot tall clumps of fine-textured, arching, blue-green foliage is primarily grown in shaded landscapes as ground cover.

