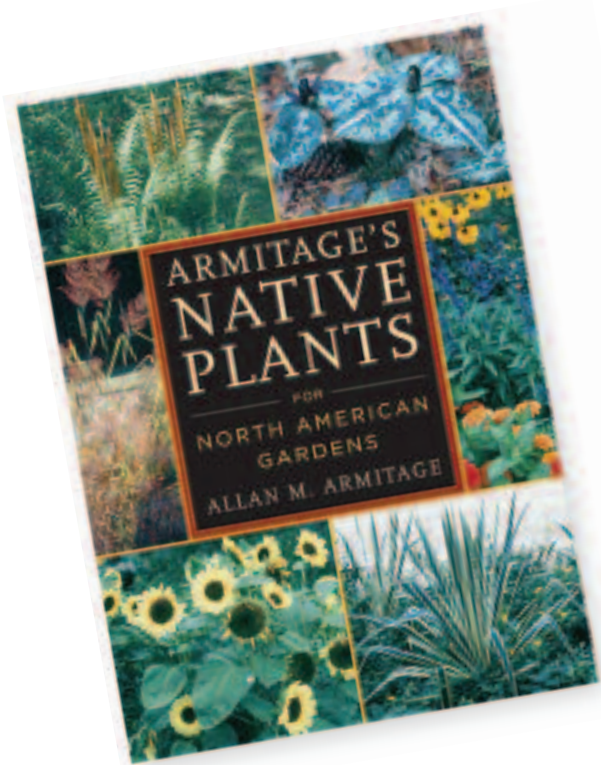


Armitage's Native Plants for North American Gardens

Allan M Armitage

Timber Press,
133 SW 2nd Avenue, Suite 450, Portland, Oregon 97204;
800.327.5680; URL: <http://www.timberpress.com>.
2006, hardcover, US\$ 49.95
(ISBN 0-88192-760-0),
452 p, 443 color photos, 26 x 18.5 cm (7.4 x 10.4 in).



If you don't read the preface before digesting the heart of this work, then you will miss the whole point of the book. It is in the preface that the author makes his case for incorporating native plants in any garden—not because they are not alien, that they do not become weeds, or that they are less beautiful than any other garden plant. No, the author judges each native on its individual merits. Does it possess the same qualities of beauty, color, and interest as other garden plants? Of the more than 17 000 native plant candidates, those included are only those available by catalog, Internet sources, and plant promotion organizations.

Do not expect to find information on ecotypes, preferred aspects or slope angles, soil chemistry, synecology, or provenances. Unlike what the title might suggest, this is a book of herbaceous garden plants only. More than 160 genera of wildflowers, ferns, grasses, orchids, and skunk cabbages, arranged alphabetically, are covered in 329 pages

of lightly written, sometimes humorous text. Common names, family affiliations, general descriptions and use, habitat, hardiness, maintenance, and sexual and asexual propagation are included in the discussion of each species. Etymologies of scientific names and anecdotes of plant introductions and people add to the interest and usefulness of the book. It is noted, for example, that many of our natives were commercially appreciated first by European growers, bred by them, and then sent back to the US for sale.

The lack of any introduction, overview, dedication, acknowledgments, conclusions, or other classically included book bulwarks detract, possibly, from the book's fullness and significance. But helping to round out the book are lists of drought-tolerant plants, water-loving plants, plants for butterflies and hummingbirds, rabbit- and deer-resistant plants, plants for full sun or part to heavy shade, ephemeral and annual plants, and bulbs and

corms. There are also lists of nurseries and native plant appreciation or promotion organizations that will prove useful as long as the volunteers who frequently act as representatives remain in their position. The reference book list consists of only 3 books. The index of included species is mostly redundant as the species are arranged alphabetically in the book.

Mesic and woodland species dominate, reflecting, perhaps, either the author's familiarity with them or their more general availability in the marketplace. Conversely, at least 22 of the more than 400 species covered can be grown in Denver without supplemental irrigation.

Discussions of the several grasses omit the important distinction between warm- and cool-season species and the discussion of buffalograss (*Bouteloua dactyloides*) omits the male and female nature of available cultivars, as well as the distinction between using treated versus nontreated seeds in establishment of the latter. It is reported that

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blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) prefers slightly acidic soils even though it occupies thousands of square miles of alkaline soils in Colorado where it is the State Grass. And, I am left wondering if I am the only one to have *Nasella* (*Stipa tenuissima*) turn into a native weed.

Any book covering this many species is bound to have a few errors of omission or commission and this one is no exception. Among them is the plate accompanying *Penstemon strictus* that is mislabeled, and *Penstemon virgatus* grows to 60 cm tall, not 60 inches. It might also have been reported that *Verbena hastata* can grow to 7 to 8 feet tall. The *Yucca glauca* plate and description depicts a plant very, very different from the same species growing on the high plains.

Included in the occasionally baffling or confusing terminology are undefined terms such as “composted soil” and “mature mixes.” The cultural instructions for *Shortia* include, “should not be fertilized with organic fertilizers as this will surely burn the thin roots.” *Yucca* species were removed from the author’s garden to safeguard his grandchildren when simple removal of the offending sharp leaf blade tips might have accomplished the same thing. Mixing “stratification” for “scarification,” as it is with *Amsonia*, and using a cacophony of varied instructions for what could be simply intended by the term “stratification,” confuses the seed propagation portion of many species.

Clues to the garden requirements of a species sometimes can be deciphered from an account of its native habitat. But, in too many cases, the habitat listed is no more than a less useful geographical range for the species.

“Drought” and “drought tolerant” as this author and others use it goes undefined. If drought could be defined as receiving half of the annual precipitation, then the author’s garden would still receive 25 to 30 inches of rain—twice what Denver normally receives in a no-drought year.

Without acknowledging that many gardeners deal with soils whose high pH is practically impossible to lower, cultural instructions for certain plants recommend adding lime. This throws a veil of doubt on the basic level of garden conditions that the author is attempting to address.

Because Dr Armitage suggests that another edition of this tome is anticipated, I respectfully suggest that he add a section on soil preparation, pH adaptability, and at least some information on propagation techniques and standardization of terms. And, because he is an expert on the subject, why not add a line to appropriate species noting their adaptability as cut flowers. A list of native state flowers would be nice, too.

Eastern or more mesic climate gardeners will probably enjoy this sturdily bound book and want to keep it easily accessible. Gardeners west of the mid-grass prairies

who face ever more common water shortages, expensive water, watering restrictions, highly alkaline and clayey soils, may too want to have this book, but probably farther away on the shelf.

Finally, consider this book a celebration of native herbaceous plants that may serve to bridge the gap between native plant nerds and the general gardening public. Though each state most likely has similar numbers of native plants worthy of gardens, the availability of these plants won’t increase significantly unless more books like this are written and more readers convince their local garden centers and nurseries to carry them. And remember, be sure to read the preface first; at least you will find out who Laura and Heather are.

—Jim Borland

Jim Borland is a talk-show host, author, and horticulturist who gardens with thousands of no-water native species in Denver, Colorado.