MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Cultivating the Future: Expanding Commercial Nursery Success with Organic and Native Plants

For ornamental nursery growers, the increasing overlap between organic gardening and native plant use represents a strong market opportunity rather than just a consumer trend. Both movements are driven by customer demand for environmentally responsible landscapes. **Organic gardening** emphasizes reduced reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, while **native plant gardening** focuses on species adapted to local soils, climate, and rainfall patterns. Together, these approaches promote healthier soils, improved water efficiency, and stronger support for pollinators and beneficial insects—outcomes that many retail customers now actively seek.

From a production standpoint, native and well-adapted ornamental plants often require fewer chemical inputs, less irrigation, and lower long-term maintenance, which can reduce production risk. These characteristics appeal to buyers looking for durable, landscape-ready material. As public interest in sustainability, climate resilience, and wildlife-friendly landscapes continues to grow, demand for plants that fit both organic and native plant systems is increasing. Nurseries that position their product lines to meet these expectations are well placed to capture expanding retail, landscape, and municipal markets tied to sustainable landscape management.

Organic Movement

The term *organic farming* has been around for almost 100 years, and the movement began with a focus on soil health. In the 1960s, organic production banned the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, and other substances. Consumers believe that organic products have lower levels of pesticides and are more environmentally friendly.

In 2006, most organic sales were for fruits and vegetables, followed by dairy. During that same time, organic nursery and greenhouse production covered about 3,300 acres, an 83 percent increase since 2004. Research indicates that organic production of these commodities has continued to increase, and that consumers are willing to pay more for organic products. The 2025 National Gardening Survey indicates that one in three participants purchase mostly or all organic products. Market data suggests that organic production can be profitable for the nursery and greenhouse industry.

Benefits of Organic Agriculture

In addition to increased income for producers, there are many benefits of organic agricultural practices. Organic production methods can maintain or increase the organic component in soils while positively impacting soil fertility, soil structure, water retention, and carbon sequestration while reducing erosion. It also reduces exposure to toxins since most synthetic pesticides and fertilizers are not allowed.

Organic agriculture often relies on crop rotation and the use of natural predators to help control pests. These practices increase the biodiversity of native insects, including pollinators. Organic food crops tend to have higher nutrient concentrations compared to traditionally grown crops. Finally, organic farms are usually smaller than conventional operations and often encourage community interactions that can lead to greater connections with local consumers.



Southern magnolia

Obstacles to Organic Production

Of course, there are obstacles to organic production. The certification process can be expensive. If crops are going to be produced in-ground, the soil must be managed using organic standards for 3 years, which limits income from the transitioning area. If crops are going to be produced in containers, Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)-certified potting media must be used. There may also be equipment and commodity storage costs to separate organic from non-organic crops.

Records must be very carefully maintained and may require a lot of time. Labor costs also can be higher since non-chemical production practices are more labor-intensive. Availability of organic seed may be lacking, and rooting hormones commonly used in traditional ornamental production are prohibited in organic crops. Lack of knowledge concerning acceptable organic practices can also impact success. Finally, the newness of the organic ornamental marketplace may cause confusion in marketing and pricing organic crops.

Native Plants Movement

Native plants in the landscape have been mentioned since the 18th century, but they have increased in popularity over the past several decades. Although the term *native* is commonly used, the definition of a *native plant* may differ among federal, state, and even local agencies. However, a plant that has naturally existed for a long period of time is generally considered to be native.



Oakleaf hydrangea

Native species are those that have existed without direct or indirect human influence within political borders prior to European contact (around 1500). Native plants are recognized for contributing to biodiversity, sustainability, and ecological restoration. Native plants can be a significant part of plant sales for many nursery and greenhouse operations. Studies show that many people purchase and plant natives, and they are willing to pay more for plants native to their area. In 2025, one in four National Gardening Survey participants specifically purchased native plants, representing a 17 percent increase from 2020.

Benefits of Native Plants

The use of native plants increases the biodiversity of the animals in the landscape. Many birds and insects, including pollinators, only feed on plants from their native habitat. Landscapes that contain only non-native plants can be food deserts for beneficial pollinators and animals that rely on the native plants, and other insects, as part of their diet. Because they are adapted to the local area, native plants may require less pest control than non-natives. They may also require less water after they are established in the landscape.



Winterberry holly

Obstacles to Ornamental Native Plant Production

Although consumers want native plants, there are obstacles to their production. Rules and regulations about native plants can differ from one area to another. It is important to know your local market, especially if regulations or preferences are for a local ecotype. Sources of native plant seeds are limited, and wild harvesting is often a poor or prohibited practice.

Asexual propagation through cuttings is also a possibility for native plants, but it can be difficult. Cuttings taken from native stands may be under environmental stress, which reduces rooting percentages, and it also may be prohibited. Using maintained nursery stock as a cutting source may improve rooting percentages. While still lacking, research has improved rooting success for many native species. As with organic production, these challenges can increase the cost of native plant production.

Conclusions

Organic and native plant gardening naturally align, and both sectors are projected to enjoy continued growth. Additionally, consumers are willing to pay a premium for both native and organic plant products. Although there are barriers, there is a significant potential market for organic ornamental plant production.

Organic Production Resources

- Organic regulations can be found on the Code of Federal Regulations website. The National List in subpart G provides information on allowed and prohibited substances for organic production.
- The USDA Organic Integrity Database provides information on locating an organic certifier.
- The Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) is a network assembled by the USDA's National Organic Program to support transitioning and organic producers with mentorship and resources.
- The USDA Organic Production site contains subject guides, legislation and regulations, production information, oral histories, and other resources for farmers and ranchers interested in organic production.
- Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) is a trusted source of sustainable agriculture information and maintains a knowledge base of practical multimedia resources for farmers, ranchers, and educators.
- OMRI reviews and lists the input products, such as fertilizers, pest controls, and livestock care products, that comply with organic standards.

Native Plant Production Resources

- The Plant Native has regional quick guides and lists of native plant nurseries and native plant societies in the U.S. and Canada.
- The North American Native Plant Society has a seed exchange, lists of native plant societies, plant production information, and publications.
- The USDA Plants Database has detailed plant fact sheets, accepted nomenclature, and mapping of native ranges by state/county.
- The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service has technical information for agricultural producers on plant materials and production practices.
- The Xerces Society Native Plant, Seed, and Services Directory has a searchable database of commercial suppliers of native seeds and plants.
- Tallgrass Prairie Center has a native seed production manual and research-based propagation techniques.
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Native Plant Materials Program has resources on collection, evaluation, and field establishment of native seed.
- The Native Plants Journal has resources on commercial native plants including propagation, market trends, and species availability.
- Digger Magazine offers insights into the production and marketing of native plants in the nursery industry.
- The Ecological Landscape Alliance promotes sustainable approaches to landscape design, construction, and management.
- The Missouri Botanical Garden's Plant Finder has a comprehensive list of plant materials grown in the Kemper Center display gardens.
- State and national nursery and/or landscape associations can help you stay current with production and market trends in the local, regional, and national industry.



Native azaleas

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