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Celebrate Earth Day with native plants

By ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

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Native plants blooming at Archbold this spring, from left: *Lupinus diffusus* by Stephanie Koontz; *Asimina reticulata* by Lexi Siegle; and *Calamintha ashei* by Lexi Siegle.

STEPHANIE KOONTZ/LEXI SIEGLE PHOTOS

Earth Day is tomorrow, April 22, and April is National Native Plant Month. The first Earth Day was

celebrated in 1970, where 20 million Americans — one-tenth of the U.S. population at that time — joined together across hundreds of cities to demand a new path forward for our planet.

There were protests about declining air quality, reduced water quality, and loss of habitat and species, but Earth Day has also always been a celebration of nature, and an acknowledgement that nature is essential to a sustainable life on Earth. The first Earth Day is credited with galvanizing millions of people worldwide to help protect the planet.

One way we can help protect the planet is by using native plants in our landscaping. Last month, the 117th US Congress agreed to a simple resolution designating April 2021 as National Native Plant Month ([congress.gov/117/bills/sres/109/BILLS-117sres109ats.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/sres/109/BILLS-117sres109ats/pdf)). The resolution recognized “there are more than 17,000 native plant species in the United States, which include trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, and wildflowers.”

Native plants, indigenous species that have evolved and naturally occur in a particular area, are an important component of resilient ecosystems and natural areas. According to the resolution, “Native plants provide shelter as well as nectar, pollen, and seeds that serve as food for native butterflies, insects, birds, and other wildlife in ways that non-native plants cannot.”

Back in 2011, when Archbold Biological Station added two state-of-the-art buildings to its facility, known as the Adrian Archbold Lodge and Frances Archbold Hufty Learning Center, the decision was made to ‘go native’ with the landscaping around the buildings. Bringing this Archbold inspiration to life was the work of Nancy Bissett of The Natives, located in Davenport. Together as a team, Bissett and Archbold Biological Station designed the entire 2-acres surrounding the buildings using only plants native to this region. Bissett also grew and planted a total of nearly 12,000 individual plants of more than 75 species for the project. The open vista of native plants surrounding the buildings is now a peaceful, aesthetic setting and serves as a beautiful living display to educate visitors.

In a 2018 interview, Archbold Executive Director Dr. Hilary Swain remarked, “The inspiration for our native landscaping comes from the concept that we should use the right plants in the right places. We decided during the early planning phase of our new buildings to ‘go native’ by using only trees, shrubs, grasses, and flowers found in natural areas in south central Florida and by planting them in the right spot in the lands around the buildings based on their unique light, water, and soil needs.”

She continued, “Another reason we were enthusiastic about native plants is that the modeling estimates we ran during construction and design suggested we would save about 3/4 million gallons of water a year because native plants do not need any irrigation after establishment.”

The other benefit to ‘going native’ was that the native plants need no fertilizer. However, this approach is not maintenance-free.

Swain notes, “The challenge for Archbold has been that the landscaping, which was planted on very disturbed soils, has needed almost continual weeding to keep non-natives, such as Natal Grass, and weedy native plants at bay. We appreciate the efforts of all our volunteers who have helped us with this job.”

To learn more about Florida’s native plants, visit the Florida Native Plant Society here www.fnps.org.

To find out more about Earth Day visit www.earthday.org.

Read more about the Frances Archbold Hufty Learning Center and Adrian Archbold Lodge at www.archbold-station.org/html/education/aac.html.

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