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What To Expect at a Native Plant Sale- “They Live In Their Roots”

Native plant sales can be different than visiting a typical nursery, which may surprise new native gardeners! Here we address what to expect from NPU's sales in particular. (See bottom of document for footnote and more photos!)

The Main Whats and Whys-

Plants won't be in prettied-up pots. Native plant growers usually sell in large quantities to parks and restoration companies, so pots and plants aren't optimized for retail. While flats packed to the gills with plants are somewhat less polished than typical retail displays, it helps us keep transport and space usage as efficient as possible, and so keeps costs down.

Plants are usually young and fairly small. Larger plants are difficult to transport without damage, and many species quickly develop extensive root systems or taproots, so planting them when they're young is ideal for growers and customers. They'll get bigger, many will get MUCH bigger.

Plant size, and some availability, will vary year to year. Some species are very picky about growing conditions, and may germinate late or not at all if spring is cloudy. We also occasionally receive extra large second year plants, which we often trim back.

Some plants may have damaged top growth- these plants are healthy as long as their roots are healthy! Transport can be rough on plants, and we may trim the tops from tall plants to keep them from snapping at the base. Native plants live in their roots, and if their roots are healthy, their top growth will bounce back!

By June, some plants are showing heat/water stress (yellowing or dropping lower leaves). These plants are healthy as long as their roots are healthy! By summer plants are getting bigger, and many pots are solid with roots and difficult to keep watered. These plants will go nuts when they're planted and can get their roots down!

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### **... and here's a longer explanation for the curious!**

Native plants are a bit different than normal non-native plants and cultivars developed for the retail nursery trade, and one can expect different things from native plant sales than traditional nursery offerings.

There are a few reasons for this:

First, residential demand for natives is only just now emerging. Currently, most native plants are grown for the restoration business. *\*(See endnotes)* Additionally, native plants develop and bloom on their own schedules, and rarely bloom continuously like non-native annuals have been developed to do. Likewise, they aren't domesticated like garden vegetable plants.

Native species have a vast array of growing requirements - replicating them all in a nursery setting is a daunting task. They also often have diverse pollinators, and methods of seed dispersal that complicate propagation. Of the thousands of native species in eastern North America, only a relative few are suitable for the restoration nursery trade.

Much restoration work can use seeds. But sometimes, using plants with an existing root system is preferable. *\*\** Plants are grown in small pots or plugs, intended to encourage substantial root growth while taking up minimal space and resources. **The pots aren't prettied up for retail sale, and the plants aren't meant to be in their pots for long because natives tend to establish extensive root systems in their first years.** The pots are a stopgap to allow young plants to be moved easily, so they can spend their energy on establishing after they are planted!

**Which brings us to our sale.** We do not grow our own plants (although we aren't ruling out a limited amount of that in the future). Most of the plants we have available to us are plants produced like those purchased by environmental restoration companies, corporate landscape companies, and park systems who generally deal in enormous orders. *\**

NPU carries 200+ herbaceous species in the spring that we source from a dozen or more nurseries, each of whom have variability in their stock depending on their local weather. While we have, as far as we know, both the largest and most diverse in-person native plant sale in the midwest, it also demonstrates the relatively small number of native species being propagated commercially (vs the thousands of species native to our region) and the difficulties often had with just those few species!

Many native plants grow quickly, especially prairie plants. Ideally, a plant started at the nursery in winter is ready to be planted in mid-April to mid-May. In Indiana at least, that timeline changes with latitude. Here, by the time June rolls around, the plants have often filled the pot or plug with roots. They are running out of growing medium, and need watered more than once a day when it's hot. Because of this situation, they may appear stressed with some sparse, yellowing leaves and gangly stems. But here's the thing- **those roots are ready to GO.**

What customers are really buying is a pot of roots that, with a few exceptions, will result in a long-lived perennial. **Customers need to plant with next year in mind; any blooms or substantial growth in year one is a bonus.** Some native plants really exhibit the adage "First year they sleep, second year they creep, third year they leap." Prairie plants often live a long time and take several years to mature. However, other species' habit is to grow fast and make TON of seeds (so they reseed themselves- customers will not generally need to repurchase the species in their plantings). Customers are often shocked at how their plants look full and bloom in the first year.



All this to say- it helps for customers to understand what they're seeing at native plant sales, and adjust their expectations accordingly. **Top growth is less important than the root system that the plant has developed.** Often, the plant can suffer a great deal of top growth damage- even complete loss, and send up new shoots from the roots, no problem.

#### END NOTES:

\*Previously, most demand has been from government agencies like state and national parks/forests, looking to restore native habitat on their managed properties, and third party environmental consulting companies that handle contracts like wetland mitigation services (if a developer impacts a wetland they usually have to improve an existing one, or create a new one somewhere else) and coal mine reclamation projects. Relatively speaking, there aren't very many native plant growers yet, and because of where and how natives were being used, the plant products aren't generally geared toward retail.

\*\*This can be due to location, like stream bank stabilization or a hillside with erosion, and the plants are given a head start, theoretically to establish faster and not be washed away. Sometimes clients want to fill in a public-facing area fast, for aesthetic reasons. Sometimes the goal can be to outpace invasive plant competition.



