

Order in the Garden!

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First year, sleep; second year, creep; third year, leap. That's the advice of green-thumbs for those who decide to plant native species in their gardens. In other words, have patience with your new seedlings.

There may be a less happy corollary to this timetable, though, at least when your focus shifts from introducing a single new plant to filling an entire garden with natives: first year, seeds; second year, weeds; third year, chaos. That was the progression of my backyard botanical garden composed of native species. It descended rapidly from orderly patches of flowering plants, each with their own marker, to a dense undifferentiated tangle along the margins and often around valuable but slow-growing natives, threatening to shade them out. I mistakenly assumed that just by planting natives, everyone would get along. They'd somehow keep to their assigned section and not eye their neighboring plant's turf with longing. After all, I figured, these plants had tens of thousands of years of evolution to figure out competition and coexistence.

Was I ever wrong! Just because plants are native, they can be as aggressive as any non-native in crowding out the less competitive—I prefer “more sensitive”—members of our local flora. The spillover of one flowering plant may be unwelcome and require the seemingly unnatural experience

of weeding out natives and treating them a bit like invasive weeds. There is a great solution to this predicament, though: put the over-extenders in separate pots and share them with your friends. My wife and I, for



example, currently have this problem with the magnificent blue passion flower vine, which produces the most spectacular flowers in our local flora. It took three years in a sunny spot for this species to rev up but now it volunteers everywhere. Now we have run out of friends or neighbors to whom to offer

pots of this vine. So if you need blue passion flower vine for your trellises or sunny front porches, drop me an email at edinerstein@resolve.ngo. The bumblebees will love you.

Obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) is one native that you think would behave given its name. A member of the mint family, the obedient plant sends up 3-foot stems at the end of summer and offers a delightful spray of lilac-to-magenta flowers along its stalks. The name is derived from the plant's pliancy: if you bend the stem gently, rather than snap off, it will keep that bended shape as it continues to grow. If planted in the right conditions, however, in well-watered areas on fertile soil and in partial sun, the obedient plant can become rather disobedient and wander into the neighboring plant beds.

I don't mind this overreach because the obedient plant is such a wonderful wildflower to grow, attracting ruby-throated hummingbirds, butterflies, and bumblebees to its copious nectar. Also known as false dragonhead—it resembles snapdragons from childhood gardens—obedient plant ranges from eastern Canada to Mexico. Aside from prompting childhood memories, long flowering time is another great reason to add obedient plant to your garden. Long after the last aster flower has bid adieu in October, deep into November and early December will be the bright magenta flowers of obedient plant.

We all like to be exceptions to the rule, and obedient plant is a prime example. It's a member of the mint family, the Lamiaceae, which in general is one of the most odiferous

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families of plants out there. We value fragrant members of the family—basil, sage, lavender, rosemary, thyme, oregano, marjoram, and others we use as herbs—and then there is the stinky dead nettle. With more than 7,000 species in the family, the mint is one of the top 10 families of flowering plants. I would wager that you can tell almost every species, or at least genus, apart by its odor—at least a mint connoisseur could. But you can't tell obedient plant by its odor. It has none. Like the coleus plant, another mint we

use as an indoor decoration, obedient plant has to go by its luxurious flowering stalk to claim a place in our garden and hearts. But it is a noteworthy species to have. When the dark early days of December make spring and summer feel like a distant memory, there is the still-flowering obedient plant telling us to be patient. Winter will pass and there will be flowers again. **VN**