

Gardening

Native 'Utah Choice' plants do well in home landscapes

By Maggie Wolf
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As more landscapers include Utah native plants in home and large-scale designs, it's easier to notice landscape plants that look uncommon, yet familiar. Some of the native Utah plants you recognize while hiking or camping are increasingly available in local garden centers. Shop for trees, shrubs and perennials with "Utah's Choice" tags; these are native species that perform well in Utah landscapes. Three with special appeal are firecracker penstemon, maple mallow and pinyon pine.

Firecracker penstemon (*Penstemon eatonii*) is spring and early summer's landscape star. Bright red flowers hang on growing stalks, and flowering continues upward along the stalk for several weeks. Whether named for the flower color or its cylindrical shape, firecracker penstemon snaps eyes to attention. The green, medium-texture foliage stays put year to year, maturing to a mound about 3 feet wide and 1.5 feet tall. As do most penstemons, firecracker reseeds readily after cross-pollinating with neighboring penstemons. The resulting new hybrids volunteer in odd spots around the yard, but they can be transplanted to new homes the following spring. Or, cut off flower stalks after flowering is complete and before seeds spread.

Plant firecracker penstemon in full sun and well-drained soil. Select a site where you can watch the visiting hummingbirds, and leave enough open space surrounding the plant so neighborhood cats cannot lurk and pounce on the nectaring hummers.

For yards with more shade and richer soil, maple mallow (*Iliamna rivularis*) is a good choice. Delicately pink to purple mallow-type flowers contrast strongly with the plants' typically dark green foliage. Each winter, maple mallow dies back to the ground. Every summer, the plant and its root system grows a little larger and stronger. After several years, maple mallow's summer size and shape makes it look more like a shrub than a perennial. The light-colored flowers brighten shady areas in spring and early summer. Each flower resembles a single hollyhock or a small hibiscus.

Pinyon pine (*Pinus edulis*) offers year-round green color with fine texture in a medium-size tree. Like all pines, pinyons prefer full sun and well-drained soil. Pinyon is better adapted to Utah's high pH soil than most pines, but it cannot tolerate compacted or poorly drained soil. Once established, pinyon survives with very little irrigation, so long as its root space is not limited by urban interferences like building foundations and roads.

Plant three or five pinyons to create a natural grouping, but allow plenty of space between them. These trees are accustomed to wide open spaces. Branching is better developed when sunlight can reach each side; don't grow pinyon too close to a fence or building.

Pinyon offers many native birds year-round habitat. Eventually, mature trees will bear cones with edible pine nuts, an extra benefit for homeowners and wildlife.

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Learn more about Utah's Choice plants, where to buy them, and how to support Utah's native plant industry, at www.utahschoice.org.