

CLIENT HANDOUT • GETTING STARTED

Native Garden Starter Guide

New to native plants? Start here. What suits your soil, what to plant, and how to get your new garden through its first year without a fuss.



NSW Christmas bush · Photo: Petra Holland, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Hairpin banksia · Photo: Lucas Christofides, CC BY (iNaturalist)



Blue flax-lily · Photo: John Tann, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Five steps to a happy native garden

- 1 **Know your patch.** Is your soil sandy (from sandstone) or heavy clay (from shale)? That decides which plants will thrive. See page 2.
- 2 **Plan in layers.** A small tree, shrubs, grasses and groundcovers together look fuller, and give birds, bees and lizards somewhere to live.
- 3 **Choose local plants.** Plants from your local bushland are used to your soil and rainfall. Two ready-made plant lists are on page 3.
- 4 **Plant in autumn** (March–May). Warm soil and winter rain grow strong roots before summer. Early spring is the next best time.
- 5 **Water deeply, then step back.** Give a good deep drink now and then through the first summer. Mulch? Only if your site needs it: coarse, typically 50–75 mm, kept off stems. Page 4 has the details.

Why local natives?

- Suited to North Shore soils and rainfall, so less watering and feeding once they're settled in.
- Food and shelter for local wildlife: honeyeaters, wrens, native bees, butterflies and skinks.
- A living link to the bushland on our doorstep, including Blue Gum High Forest and Sydney Turpentine-Ironbark Forest.
- Low-maintenance doesn't mean no maintenance. A light trim after flowering and a quick check of the soil keeps them looking good.

MYTH: "Natives don't need watering."

FACT: They do while they settle in, usually for the first 12 months. Many young natives are lost in their first summer.

Small garden? Everything in this guide works in a courtyard, front strip or a few garden beds. Pick one small tree, a few shrubs and plenty of groundcovers.

Sources: ANPSA FAQ; APS NSW "Growing native plants in clay soils" (2021); Sydney Wildflower Nursery (autumn planting); Birds in Backyards; Sydney Water Water Wise Guidelines; PlantNET; Ku-ring-gai Council native gardening pages; RF Horticulture native-plants list.

Step 1: Know your patch

North Shore gardens sit on two very different soils. Work out which one you've got, and most of your plant choices follow.

	Sandstone ("light") soils	Shale / clay ("heavy") soils
Typical clues	Sandy, pale soil that drains fast; sandstone rock nearby; often slopes and gullies	Sticky soil that holds water; richer, darker topsoil; the higher ridges of the upper North Shore
Original bushland	Sydney sandstone woodland and forest, e.g. Duffys Forest and coastal sandstone forest	Blue Gum High Forest and Sydney Turpentine-Ironbark Forest (both critically endangered)
Plants that love it	Banksias, grevilleas, boronia, flannel flower, wattles, Christmas bush	Blueberry ash, grey myrtle, coffee bush, native indigo, lomandra, weeping grass
Watch out for	Low in nutrients and dries out fast. Use low-phosphorus fertiliser only. Whether mulch helps is decided bed by bed.	Soggy soil. Dig only when it's slightly moist, add organic matter (like compost), think about gypsum, and raise beds at least 25 cm where water sits

Find out what you have

- **Ku-ring-gai residents:** the council's free online *Native Planting Guide* tells you whether your address is on light or heavy soil and suggests plants.
- **Elsewhere:** look at your soil after rain, and at the bushland nearest you. Or ask me: I check this at every Native Garden Walk.
- Many gardens have a mix, or soil trucked in from somewhere else. Plant for what's actually in the bed.

 **Quick tip: the sausage test.** Squeeze a moist handful of soil. If it rolls into a bendy sausage, it's clay. If it crumbles and feels gritty, it's sandy.

Before you dig

- **Trees:** pruning or removing larger trees needs council approval in most North Shore councils (Ku-ring-gai: 5 m tall or a 150 mm trunk at ground level). See my *Before You Remove a Tree* sheet.
- **Tree roots:** no raised beds or heavy digging over the roots of established trees.
- **Bushfire-prone land:** check your property on the NSW RFS online tool. All plants burn. Keep oily ones (gum trees, tea-trees, paperbarks, bottlebrushes) away from the house.
- **Pipes and cables:** check Before You Dig Australia (byda.com.au) before digging deep.
- **Renting?** Get the owner's OK first.

Plan in layers

Small tree: shade, nectar, fruit (one is plenty in a small garden)

Shrubs: include some **dense or prickly** ones for small birds

Grasses, lilies & strappy plants: seeds, skink cover

Groundcovers & climbers: living mulch, fences and walls

Did you know? A garden of only nectar plants (grevilleas, bottlebrushes) can suit bossy noisy miners, which chase small birds away. A mix of layers suits small birds.

Free help from councils

Run by councils and community groups, not RF Horticulture. Check eligibility on their websites.

- **Ku-ring-gai:** Native Planting Guide; Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Nursery (local plants); Water Smart rebates (tanks, rain gardens)
- **Hornsby:** free native plant giveaways for residents
- **North Sydney:** Native Havens program
- **Lane Cove:** Backyard Habitat program
- **Anyone:** Habitat Stepping Stones pledge and front-fence plaque

Collected free plants? I'm happy to place and plant them for you.

8 easy plants for clay gardens Upper North Shore ridges; Blue Gum & Turpentine-Ironbark country



Photo: T. Hammer, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Blueberry ash

Elaeocarpus reticulatus

Full sun to part shade

Small tree; fringed bell flowers, blue fruit for birds. Good screen.



Photo: Bryce Watts-Parker, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Grey myrtle

Backhousia myrtifolia

Part shade to shade

Dense hedge or screen for shade; creamy flowers for insects.



Photo: Scott W. Gavins, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Coffee bush

Breynea oblongifolia

to 3 m · Part shade to shade

Shrub for under trees; berries for birds; food for butterfly caterpillars.



Photo: stephvg (CC0, iNaturalist)

Native indigo

Indigofera australis

to 2.5 m · Full sun to part shade

Light shrub with mauve pea flowers for bees.



Photo: Nicole Kearney, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Spiny-headed mat-rush

Lomandra longifolia

Full sun to shade

Extremely hardy; cover for skinks; skipper butterflies.



Photo: John Tann, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Blue flax-lily

Dianella caerulea

Full sun to shade

Blue flowers and berries; a favourite of native bees.



Photo: guymer, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Weeping grass

Microlaena stipoides

to 0.7 m · Full sun to shade

A native lawn or meadow grass that copes with shade.



Photo: Cobi Calyx, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Purple coral pea

Hardenbergia violacea

to 2 m · Full sun to part shade

Easy spring-flowering climber or groundcover.

8 easy plants for sandy gardens Sandy soils near sandstone bushland, slopes and gullies



Photo: Petra Holland, CC BY (iNaturalist)

NSW Christmas bush

Ceratopetalum gummiferum

Full sun to part shade

Turns red at Christmas (the red bits are sepals, not petals).



Photo: Lucas Christofides, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Hairpin banksia

Banksia spinulosa

to 3 m · Full sun to part shade

Autumn–winter nectar for honeyeaters; compact forms.



Photo: Petra Holland, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Red spider flower

Grevillea speciosa

0.4–3 m · Full sun

Red flowers most of the year for honeyeaters.



Photo: ronavery, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Sweet wattle

Acacia suaveolens

0.3–2.5 m · Full sun

Scented winter flowers for bees.



Photo: nellfws, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Sydney boronia

Boronia ledifolia

0.3–1.5 m · Full sun to part shade

Pink spring flowers; needs perfect drainage.

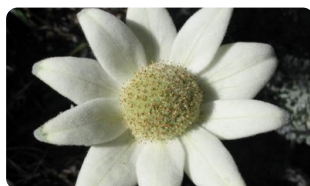


Photo: John Barkla, CC BY (iNaturalist)

Flannel flower

Actinotus helianthi

30–90 cm · Full sun

Needs sun and soil that drains fast. Short-lived, but worth it.

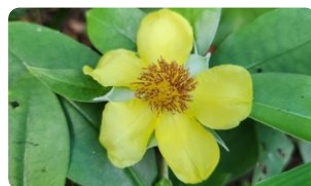


Photo: Oliver Spnović (CC0, iNaturalist)

Golden guinea flower

Hibbertia scandens

to 4 m · Full sun to part shade

Big yellow flowers; climber or groundcover.



Photo: Greg Tasney, CC BY-SA (iNaturalist)

Silky purple-flag

Patersonia sericea

Full sun

Purple flowers for bees.

How to use these lists: think of them as a starting point, not a rulebook. Heights are for plants in the wild (PlantNET). Most stay smaller in gardens, and nurseries sell compact forms. Where you can, buy plants grown from local seed (e.g. the Ku-ring-gai Wildflower Nursery or local community nurseries). Want a list made for your own garden's soil, light and space? Book a Native Garden Walk.

Planting day, and the first year

Planting day

- 1 **Clear weeds first**, bit by bit if birds hide in them (see my weeds booklet).
- 2 **Go small**. Tubestock (seedlings in skinny tubes) and small pots have less tangled roots and settle in faster than big plants.
- 3 **Dig wide, not deep**, especially in clay. Don't dig wet clay: it wrecks the soil's structure.
- 4 **Fertiliser**: if you use any, mix a slow-release, **low-phosphorus** native fertiliser into the soil at the label rate. Keep chook (fowl) manure and mushroom compost away from banksias, grevilleas and waratahs.
- 5 **Water in well**. If the site needs mulch, use **coarse** mulch only, typically 50–75 mm, kept clear of stems. No fine mulch. Your soil decides whether, and how deep.
- 6 Sink a **pot or tin with holes in it** beside larger plants, so water goes straight to the roots.

Replacing lawn?

Sick of mowing? In shady or low-traffic spots, native groundcovers make a soft, low-water swap:

- Weeping grass (*Microlaena stipoides*): mowable; sun or shade
- Kidney weed (*Dichondra repens*): low-traffic areas
- Native violet (*Viola hederacea*): moist shade
- Creeping beard grass (*Oplismenus imbecillis*): soft cover under trees

✓ Do this

- Water deeply, less often
- Weed every 2–4 weeks
- Prune after flowering

✗ Not that

- Feed just before winter
- Pile mulch against stems
- Use fine mulch

The first 12 months

- **Water deeply and less often**, especially through the first summer, when many young natives are lost. My *Watering & Mulching* sheet shows how to work out timing for your site, plus the Sydney Water rules.
- **Weed every 2–4 weeks** in new beds until plants close over.
- **No set mulch top-ups**. Check how much is left and whether water gets through. Add more only if the bed needs it.
- **Tip-prune** young shrubs (pinch off the soft tips) to keep them bushy. Prune after flowering, and never cut banksias below the green leaves.
- **Don't over-feed**. If plants are growing well, skip the fertiliser. Never feed just before winter.

Want a plan made for your garden?

That's what my **native garden advice** is for. Choose from three options: a **Native Garden Walk** (we walk your garden together, then email you a shortlist of local plants), an **Advice Visit + Plan** (a full written plan), or a **Garden Design & Planting Plan** (a to-scale plan and plant schedule, with plants, materials and installation quoted separately).

Book your next job with me within 60 days and part or all of your advice fee comes off it (one credit per property).

Call or text 0481 106 188

rfhorticulture@outlook.com · prices and details: "Native garden advice" on my website

Advice is horticultural, based on a visual inspection; it is not an arborist report, bushfire assessment, ecological survey or development-application landscape plan.

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