

# Living Gardens

## **Plant Cultivars and “Nativars” – Beware!**

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The next time you head out to the nursery to buy plants, particularly if you are gardening to attract pollinators, butterflies, or other wild critters, you will want to understand an increasingly disturbing trend in plant production and availability - **hybridized plant cultivars that may look attractive, but do not offer nectar and/or pollen for wildlife.**

A “plant cultivar” is produced by man, by taking a plant that occurs in nature and making changes in order to develop a completely new variety of that plant which looks or behaves differently. Plant hybridizers can scientifically cross-breed a plant possessing certain qualities with another plant possessing other qualities, to produce a totally new cultivar that has never before existed.

Plants are cultivated and hybridized for a number of reasons – in an attempt to create a new color, a larger size, a sturdier plant, disease or pest resistance, longer bloom time, etc. However, nectar and/or pollen production is sometimes lost in the process and plant breeders and growers are paying very little attention to this fact. It results in plants being sold that look pretty to people (I often refer to them as “eye-candy”) but offer little or no value to wildlife. Both native plant cultivars and ornamental plant cultivars are being affected. It is a double whammy to our suburban landscapes that are already being over-planted with plants from Asia and beyond that are useless to our native birds, insects, and wildlife.

Here are a couple of examples. The straight species *Liatris spicata*, commonly known as spiked gayfeather, is a native plant that is enjoyed for its nectar by bees and butterflies. In one trial planting, it was found that the *Liatris spicata* cultivar ‘Kobold’ was ignored by butterflies. The conclusions were that either there is no nectar, very little nectar, the nectar is out of reach for butterflies, or the nectar is not as sweet in this cultivar as that of the true species.

Lantana is a flowering plant that is native to tropical regions of the Americas and Africa, but it is grown as an annual here in PA during the summer months and is a favorite of butterflies and bees. I have grown various cultivars of it over many years and it has always been a dependable nectar plant in the summer garden. More recently, however, I planted a new cultivar in an attractive new color – Lantana Patriot Pillar ‘Marc Cathey.’ Not one bee, not one butterfly – nothing paid any attention to those 5 vigorous and profusely flowering plants in my garden. They looked pretty to me, but without being able to feed or support the pollinators that visit my garden, they were a waste of space.

The lesson is this: Straight natives consistently receive more wildlife visitors than cultivars or “nativars.” They can be harder to find in the nursery trade and you may have to ask about them or shop through a native plants nursery. It has been noted that flowers possessing a strong fragrance usually have nectar which attracts pollinators. When you purchase a flowering cultivar or hybrid, watch closely through the growing season to see if it is being visited by pollinators, and plan your future plant purchases accordingly.