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In the spring, gardeners' fancies often turn to thoughts of garden shows. This year, area gardeners can go native, thanks to two large events next week.

Native plants continue to grow in popularity, so it is no surprise that the Florida Association of Native Nurseries is hosting a multiday trade show that will be followed by a native plant show displaying the diversity of Florida flora. The two events run Thursday to April 6 at Osceola Heritage Park, 1901 Chief Osceola Trail, just off U.S. 192 in Kissimmee.

"A lot of people don't know what native plants are available in Florida, and this show will have a selection of uncommon plants," said Sharon Dolan of Maple Street Natives. "The native plant show displays a fantastic diversity of Florida native plants."

The West Melbourne nursery is one of 40 nurseries throughout the state participating in the trade show and plant sale. The show also features three award-winning native landscape demonstrations and two days of professional education courses on the use of native plants.

The Florida Wildflower Foundation is sponsoring a symposium to present the University of Florida's latest research on the planting of native wildflowers on roadsides and landscapes.

The Native Plant Show, the nation's first native plant wholesale trade show, is aimed at industry professionals such as landscape architects and arborists, but the show is open to the public and provides an immersion into the world of native plants. Admission to the exhibit hall is \$15 for Thursday or Friday, and \$25 for both days.

"Florida is so far ahead in organizing the native plant industry," said Cammie Donaldson, executive director of the Florida Association of Native Nurseries.

The Sunshine State — with its serious water supply challenges, dwindling wildlife habitat and invasive exotics — certainly could use the help of native plants.

Easier to keep and gentler on the environment than their out-of-town relatives, native plants can reduce the need for irrigation, chemicals and maintenance, while at the same time enhancing biodiversity. Their popularity is at such an all-time high that even Disney featured a habitat garden to educate guests at the Epcot Flower & Garden Festival. The entertainment company uses native foliage at its parks and resorts. Cheryl Coletti, public works engineering inspector for the city of Palm Bay, has registered for the Native Plant Show because she wants to discover how native plants can reduce the need for watering, chemicals and overall maintenance.

"We can set an example if we use more native plants," Coletti said.

After the show ends, the sale begins. Hosted by four chapters of the Florida Native Plant Society, including Brevard's Conradina chapter, the Central Florida Native Plant Sale will take place from 2 to 6 p.m. Friday and 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. April 6. Admission is free.

Experts will be available to help visitors select the best plants for any location, be it sandy, sunny, shady, dry or wet. Prices range from a couple of dollars for plants in 4-inch pots to \$15 for the larger specimens. "It will be the best diversity you can find in one place," said Donaldson, who lives in Melbourne.