



## Native Garden Care

### General Principles for Native Garden Care on the Gold Coast:

Caring for a native garden in Gold Coast involves understanding and working with the unique subtropical climate. The goal is to create a thriving, resilient ecosystem that supports local wildlife and requires minimal intervention once established.

Here's a comprehensive guide:

### 1. Plant Selection: The Foundation of Success

- **Right Plant, Right Place:** This is the most crucial aspect. Choose plants that are truly native to your specific region of Queensland (e.g., coastal, hinterland, dry tropics) and are suited to your garden's conditions:
  - **Sunlight:** Full sun, partial shade, or full shade.
  - **Soil Type:** Sandy, clay, loam. Gold Coast soils may vary wildly.
  - **Drainage:** Most natives prefer well-drained soil. If you have heavy clay, consider raised garden beds or soil amendments (see below).
  - **Moisture:** Some natives are drought-tolerant, others prefer consistently moist conditions. Group plants with similar water needs together.
  - **Wind Exposure:** Coastal plants are often more wind-tolerant.
  - **Mature Size:** Account for the mature height and width of plants to avoid overcrowding and excessive pruning later.
- **Local Nurseries:** Visit local native plant nurseries. Their staff are invaluable resources for advice on what thrives in your specific area. Look for plants that have evolved to your local temperatures, soils, and rainfall patterns.
- **Biodiversity:** Aim for a diverse range of plant types (trees, shrubs, groundcovers, grasses, climbers) to create different layers and habitats for wildlife. This also promotes year-round interest with varying flowers, foliage, and textures.

### 2. Soil Preparation: Creating the Right Environment

- **Good Drainage is Key:** Many Australian natives are sensitive to "wet feet." If you have heavy clay soil, improve drainage by:
  - **Adding Gypsum:** For clay soils, gypsum can help break up the clay particles.
  - **Incorporating Organic Matter:** Well-rotted compost or a coarse organic mulch dug into the top 20-30cm will improve soil structure, aeration, and water infiltration.
  - **Raised Garden Beds:** A simple and effective solution for heavy clay or poorly draining areas.

- **pH Levels:** Most Australian natives prefer slightly acidic to neutral soil (pH 5.5-6.5). Avoid adding lime or dolomite unless a soil test specifically indicates a need to raise pH, as many natives are sensitive to higher pH levels.
- **Minimal Disturbance:** Once established, try to minimise digging and disturbing the soil, as this can disrupt the delicate balance of beneficial soil microbes.

### 3. Watering: Smart and Sustainable

- **Establishment Period:** All new plants, including natives, need regular watering during their establishment phase (typically 1-3 years).
  - **Initial Watering:** Water thoroughly immediately after planting – a bucket full per plant is often recommended.
  - **Frequency:** For the first month, water twice a week. For the second and third months, once a week. After three months, you can gradually reduce it to once a month or as needed.
- **Deep and Infrequent:** The aim is to encourage deep root growth, making plants more resilient to dry periods. Water deeply enough for the water to penetrate the root zone, then allow the soil to dry out somewhat before watering again. Frequent, shallow watering encourages shallow roots.
- **Timing:** Water early in the morning or late in the afternoon/evening to minimise evaporation.
- **Mulch, Mulch, Mulch:** Apply a generous layer (75-100mm) of organic mulch (e.g., native tree bark, leaf litter, cypress blends) around your plants.
  - **Benefits of Mulch:** Retains soil moisture, suppresses weeds, regulates soil temperature, and provides nutrients as it breaks down.
  - **Application:** Keep mulch slightly away from the plant stems to prevent collar rot.
- **Rainwater Harvesting:** Consider collecting rainwater in tanks for garden use.
- **Water-Wise Zones:** Group plants with similar water requirements together to optimize watering.

### 4. Fertilising: Less is Often More

- **Low Phosphorus:** Many Australian native plants (especially those from the Proteaceae family like Banksias, Grevilleas, Hakeas) are highly sensitive to phosphorus. High levels can be toxic.
- **Specialised Fertiliser:** If you do fertilise, use a *low-phosphorus* fertiliser specifically formulated for native plants (the "P" number on the NPK ratio should be 3% or less).
- **When to Fertilise:** Generally, native plants require very little fertiliser once established in appropriate soil. If your plants look sluggish, a light application in spring or autumn can be beneficial. Avoid fertilising during very hot periods.
- **Organic Matter:** The breakdown of organic mulch often provides sufficient nutrients for many natives.

### 5. Pruning: Shaping and Health

- **Early and Regular:** For bushy growth and more flowers, start tip-pruning young plants regularly from day one. This encourages branching.
- **After Flowering:** Most flowering shrubs benefit from a light prune after their main flowering period. This promotes new growth and more blooms.
- **Remove Dead or Diseased Wood:** Regularly remove any dead, damaged, or diseased branches to maintain plant health and airflow.
- **Hard Pruning:** Most natives respond well to light and regular pruning. If a plant becomes leggy or overgrown, many (but not all) can be hard pruned to rejuvenate them. Do this during the active growing season (spring/summer) in Queensland's climate. Always check the specific plant's tolerance to hard pruning.
- **Picking Flowers:** Don't hesitate to pick flowers for indoor display – it's a natural form of pruning that can encourage more blooms.

## 6. Pest and Disease Control: Natural Solutions

- **Generally Resilient:** When planted in their preferred conditions, native plants are generally more resistant to local pests and diseases than exotics.
- **Observation:** Regularly inspect your plants for any signs of trouble.
- **Integrated Pest Management (IPM):**
  - **Healthy Garden:** A diverse and healthy garden with strong plants is your best defence.
  - **Beneficial Insects:** Encourage natural predators like ladybirds, lacewings, and parasitic wasps by planting a variety of flowers that attract them.
  - **Manual Removal:** For small infestations, hand-picking pests or hosing them off with water can be effective.
  - **Organic Solutions:** If needed, use eco-friendly and targeted sprays (e.g., horticultural oils like Eco-oil, or neem oil) that are less harmful to beneficial insects and the environment.
  - **Myrtle Rust/Phytophthora:** Be aware of specific plant pathogens like Myrtle Rust (affecting Myrtaceae family, e.g., lilly pillies, bottlebrushes) and Phytophthora cinnamomi (root rot fungus). Ensure good drainage and avoid introducing infected plant material.
- **Weed Management:** Mulching is your best friend for weed suppression. Hand-weed regularly, especially when plants are young.

## 7. Seasonal Considerations (Gold Coast, Queensland):

- **Summer (Wet Season):**
  - High humidity and rainfall. Ensure good drainage to prevent fungal issues.
  - Mulch helps keep roots cool.
  - Reduce supplemental watering if rainfall is consistent.
  - Monitor for fungal diseases and pests that thrive in humidity.
- **Autumn:**
  - Ideal time for planting new natives, allowing them to establish before winter.
  - Continue mulching.
  - Consider a light feed with low-P native fertiliser if needed.
- **Winter (Dry Season):**
  - Milder temperatures, often drier.
  - Established natives should be quite drought-tolerant, but monitor young plants.
  - Water deeply if there are extended dry spells.
  - Protect sensitive plants from occasional light frosts if they are susceptible (though less common on the immediate Gold Coast).
- **Spring:**
  - New growth burst and flowering for many species.
  - Good time for light pruning and a gentle native fertiliser application.
  - Prepare for the coming summer by ensuring mulch levels are good.

By embracing these principles, you can create a beautiful, low-maintenance native garden in Queensland that flourishes with the local environment and provides a haven for native wildlife.