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Environmental Gardening Practices & Native Plant Purchasers

The following e-GRO Alert discusses factors influencing consumers' perceptions of native plant importance.

Consumer interest in and demand for native plants has been increasing in recent years. Part of this increase can be attributed to a heightened interest in aiding the environment through sustainable purchases, including plant selection and gardening behaviors. In a 2022 HRI-funded study, we addressed the relationship between perceived importance of native plants in home gardens and landscapes and the gardening practices that U.S. consumers are currently employing at home.

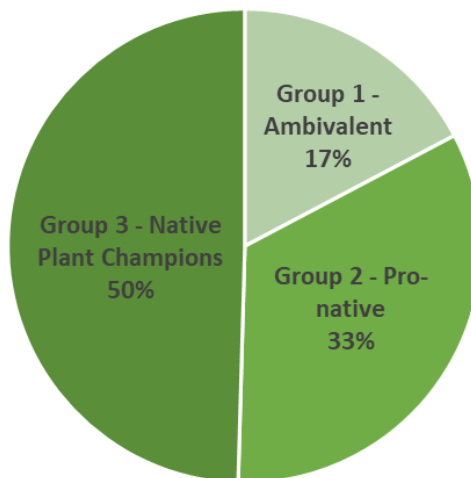


Figure 1. Division of Sample by Native Plant Importance (n=2066)

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A national sample of 2,066 people from across the U.S. participated in the survey. Based on their rating of the importance of native plants in their home landscapes and gardens, three consumer segments were identified (Fig. 1). A total of 50% of the surveyed participants indicated that native plants were very or extremely important (named “Native Plant Champions”), 33% indicated native plants were moderately important (named “Pro-native”), and 17% indicated no or slight importance (named “Ambivalent”). Demographics did not greatly influence consumer perceptions of the importance of native plants. However, their gardening practices did influence these perceptions.

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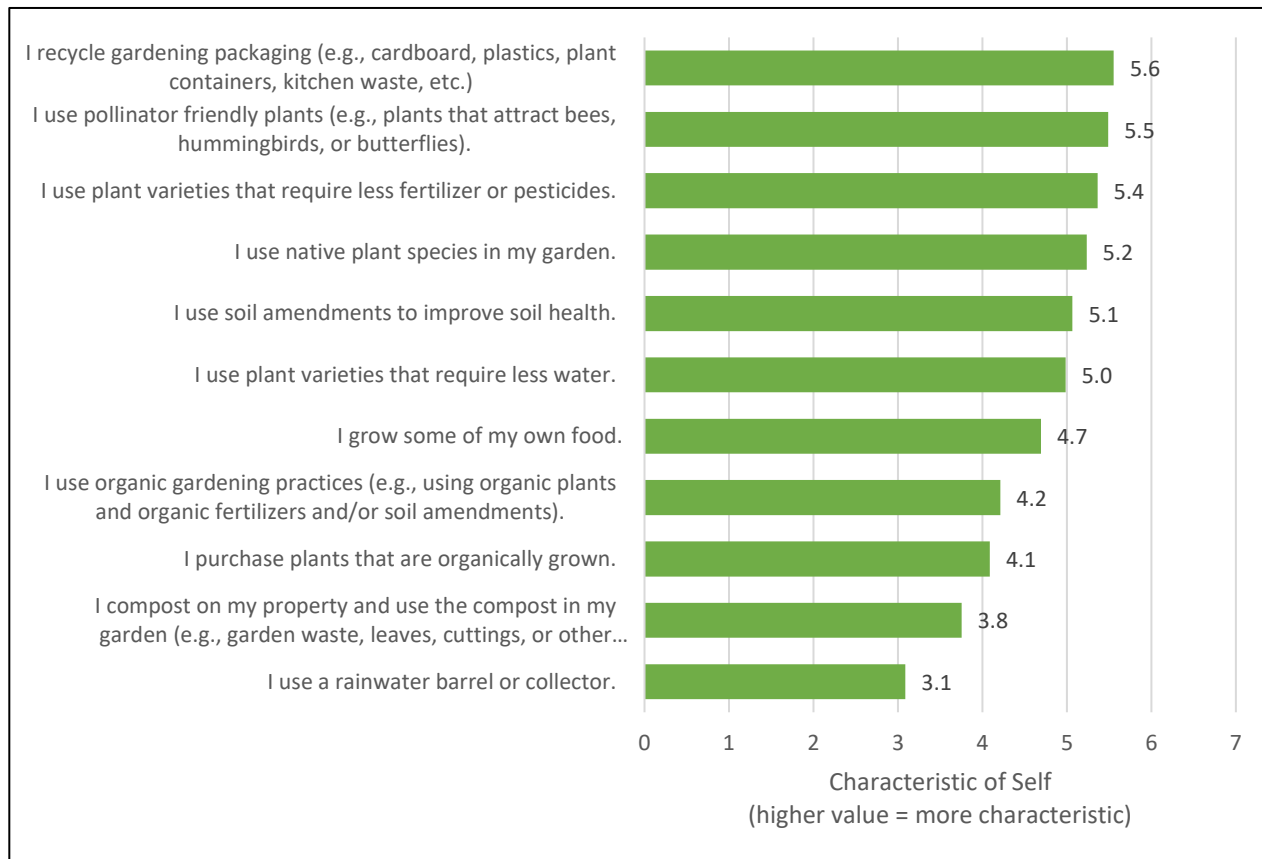


Figure 2. U.S. Consumers Participation in Pro-environmental Gardening Practices.

First, participants indicated their participation in pro-environmental gardening practices. In general, the total sample recycled gardening packaging, used pollinator friendly plants, planted plants that require less fertilizer or pesticides, used native plant species, used soil amendments to improve soil health, planted plants that require less water, and grew some of their own food (Fig. 2). They also used organic gardening practices, purchased organically grown plants, and composted on their properties. They used rainwater barrels or collectors the least frequently.

Differences were observed across the native plant consumer segments when considering their gardening practices (Fig. 3). In general, the Native Plant Champions participated more in the pro-environmental gardening practices than the Pro-native or Ambivalent segments. The Native Plant Champions indicated the greatest use of pollinator friendly plants, native plants, recycling gardening packaging, plant varieties that require less fertilizer or pesticides, plant varieties that require less water, and soil amendments. The Pro-native group had a slightly different order, with recycling gardening packaging rating the highest, followed by using pollinator friendly plants, using plant varieties that require less fertilizer or pesticides, and using soil amendments. The Ambivalent group rated all of the gardening practices significantly less than the other two segments.

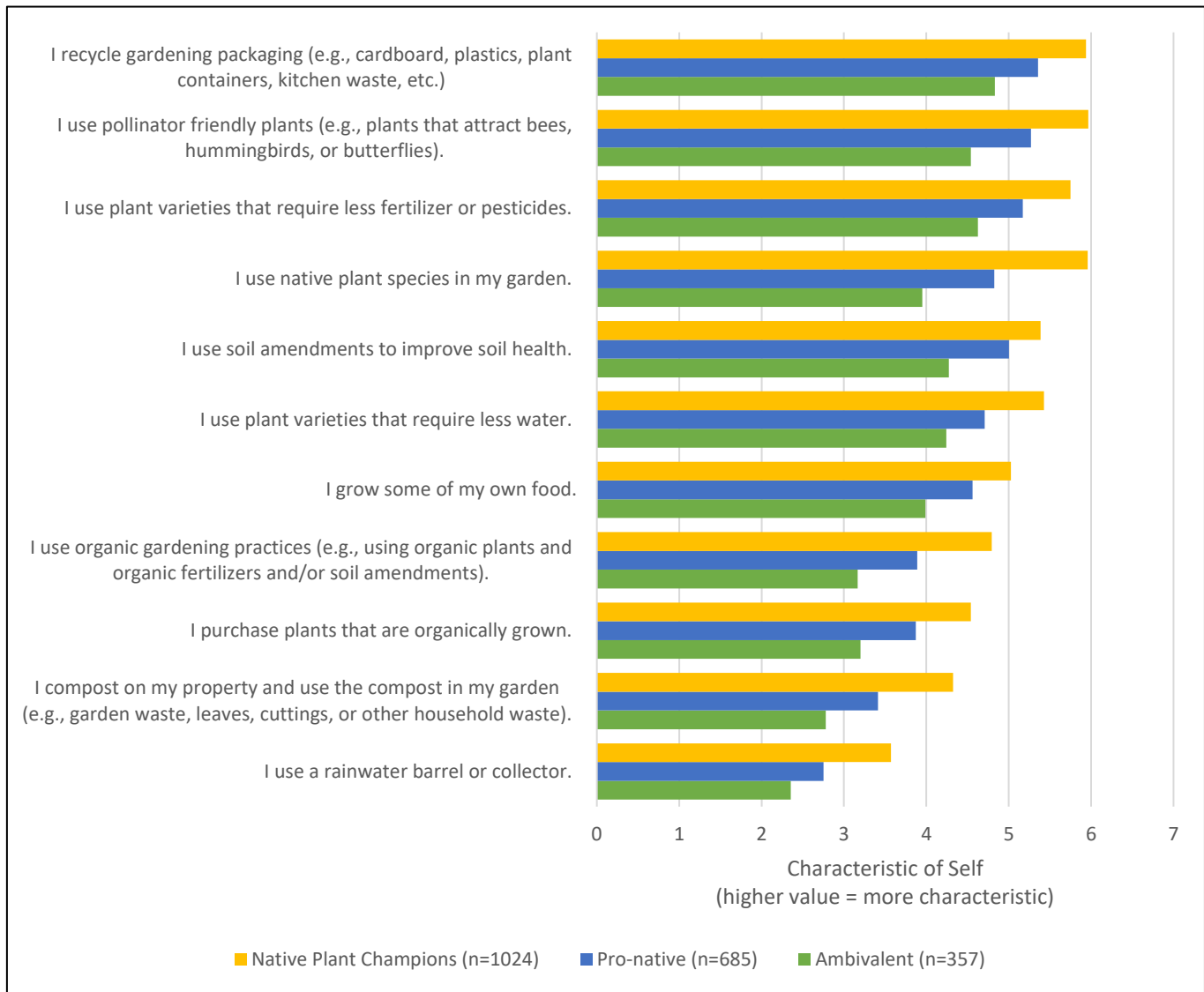


Figure 3. U.S. Consumers Participation in Pro-environmental Gardening Practices, by Native Plant Importance Cluster.

Together, these findings suggest a positive relationship between consumers’ perceptions of native plants’ importance and participating in pro-environmental gardening practices. Marketing messaging that emphasizes environmental benefits and potential benefits of native plants could encourage the Native Plant Champions and Pro-Native segments to consider additional plant options and gardening strategies. There is also potential to co-brand or market native plants with tools, information, and other items related to pro-environmental gardening practices. The Ambivalent segment also participated in some of the pro-environmental gardening practices (e.g., recycling, plants with less fertilizer or pesticide requirements, pollinator friendly plants), and may be encouraged to plant native plants if the native plant messages align with these practices.

For more information about the study, please see: Rihn, A., B.K. Behe, S. Barton, and A. Torres. 2023. Greater appeal of native plants for environmentally conscious consumers. *Journal of Environmental Horticulture*, 41(1):7-13.

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