Plants and horticultural practices go in and out of fashion just like clothes and cars. While there are some new trends on the horizon including the search for unique edible greens and dark foliage plants, in several areas interest continues to build. That is especially true for native plants.

Native plants are being recognized for their benefits to native wildlife. Our pollinating insects, birds and other creatures need these plants to complete their life cycle. While roaming through local garden centers or perusing plant catalogs, gardeners will encounter varieties of native asters, goldenrods and warm season grasses for sunny areas. Woodland gardens can be filled with bunchberries, trilliums, golden alexanders and other natives. Often cultivars of these native species, referred to as nativars, provide more vibrant colors or a longer flowering period or increased disease resistance over the species.

Native trees and shrubs play just as important role in wildlife plantings as do herbaceous plants. Early season blooms of pussy willows and spicebush provide early season pollen for native bees and flies. Birds, like chickadees, feed on the buds of many native trees and shrubs. After blossoming, berries on shadbush, viburnums and bayberries are greedily consumed by birds and some mammals.

Consider rewilding some areas especially if you have large patches of lawn. Plants some native trees and shrubs that would provide food and shelter for birds and other creatures. Underplant these areas with perennial and annual grasses and flowers. Let some more ubiquitous native plants, like wild strawberry or wood asters, take hold as well.

Even those who desire more cultivated plants can create conditions that support pollinators. Either in a designated flower garden or interspersed among vegetable plantings, consider adding known pollinator destinations such as zinnias, tithonias, nasturtiums, ammi, verbena, agastache and sunflowers. These flowers are great for insect pollinators, attractive to hummingbirds and some produce seed snatched up by goldfinches and other avian species.
The desire to grow one’s own food continues to strengthen even as space becomes limiting for apartment and condominium dwellers. Dwarf fruit varieties recently introduced include two thornless brambles. ‘Baby Cakes’ thornless blackberry can be grown in containers or small spaces with a mature height of only 3 to 4 feet. ‘Raspberry Shortcake’ is a thornless raspberry with sweet, flavorful fruit.

Several dwarf blueberries can also be grown in small spaces or containers. ‘Jelly Bean’ only grows 1 to 2 feet high. ‘Peach Sorbet’ reaches about 2 feet in height but has unique foliage colors of pink, peach, orange and emerald. With cold weather, the leaves turn a delightful purple making it a valuable asset for both edible and ornamental purposes. Try some of the miniature tree fruits like ‘Arctic Babe’ miniature nectarine and ‘Garden Sun’ miniature peach if space is limited.

With an emphasis on healthier diets, salads, stir fries and smoothies packed with healthy greens are being encouraged. One of the best reasons for growing your own food is being able to choose what you want to grow. Often interesting greens not found at the local grocery store are surprisingly easy to grow. I like the mixes the best and this year will try ‘Cheap Frills’ from Johnny’s Select Seeds (www.johnnyseeds.com), a mixture of mustards and mizuma. Another interesting selection from this seed source is ‘Kalebration’, which you might suspect is a mixture of various kale cultivars.

Feel free to try mustards, which range from mild to wild, Chinese cabbage, Pac Choi, Tatsoi, Malabar spinach, Choi sum and whatever other Asian or other green tickles your fancy. I find the fast maturing ones, like some mustards and Fun Gen, will reseed themselves if a few are allowed to go to seed. This provides you with a second crop later in the season.

Succulents are wildly popular as indoor houseplants. In fact, it seems from what I have been seeing at garden centers, plant stores and even supermarkets, is that there is a resurgence of interest in these low maintenance houseplants. Whether one is purchasing echeverias, sedums, haworthias or aloes, these plants have a few requirements that need to be met for plants to flourish.

Number one is to not overwater. Succulents have evolved to be able to withstand long periods of dry conditions. Water infrequently but this depends on the species of plant, the size of the plant, the size of the pot, and how warm you keep your home. Look up the requirements of your plant (or call us). Many succulents only need a small amount of water once or twice a month. Keep succulents in bright light with full sun being preferable. Their potting medium should be especially well-drained.

Dark colored flowers and foliage have been a compelling addition to the garden but most especially containers in the last few years. Often the contrast just between the dark purplish-
burgundy foliage and lighter colored flowers as with ‘Wine and Roses’ weigela or ‘Black Beauty’ elderberry is compelling enough to install these plants in ornamental beds.

What is most alluring is inspiring placement of dark leaved or dark flowering plants to accentuate container or annual plantings. Picture basil ‘Dark Opal’ with pink ‘Thumbelina’ zinnias or ‘Black Velvet’ petunia with gold chrysogonum and blue trailing lobelia or ‘Black Prince’ coleus with orange gerberas. There is a slew of uncommon black foliage or flowering plants to be discovered and used in the garden or containers. Be an explorer.

Give some of the newer plants a try. Even if space is limited, see how some of the dwarf varieties perform for you. Consider growing vertically. Be open to expanding your plant horizons. It’s fun and you can always count on the horticulturists at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center to assist you in your ventures.

For any horticultural queries, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.