

# Native Plant Identification & Documentation Guide

How to identify, document, and prove the native status of your plants for HOA purposes

## Why Identification Matters

The most common HOA objection to native gardens is the 'weed' classification. The legal difference between a weed and a protected native plant is identification and intent. A plant you can name — by common and scientific name, with documented native status — is not a weed in any defensible sense. This guide shows you how to build that documentation.

## Step 1 — Identify Each Plant

**Field guides:** A regional field guide (such as the Peterson Field Guide series for Eastern/Central North America) remains the most credible identification reference to cite in HOA correspondence.

**Free apps:** iNaturalist and Seek (by iNaturalist) photograph-and-identify plants and create timestamped, geotagged records — useful as documentary evidence. PictureThis and PlantNet are also widely used.

**State native plant societies:** Every state has a native plant society with regional plant lists. Many offer free identification help by email or at local chapter meetings.

**Extension offices:** Your county's land-grant university extension office identifies plants free or at minimal cost — and an extension identification carries institutional weight with HOA boards.

## Step 2 — Confirm Native Status

Once identified, confirm the species is native to your region using one of these authoritative sources:

Source	What It Provides
USDA PLANTS Database ( <a href="https://plants.usda.gov">plants.usda.gov</a> )	Federal native status by state — the standard citation
BONAP ( <a href="https://bonap.org">bonap.org</a> )	County-level native range maps
Your state native plant society	Regional native plant lists and local expertise
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center	Searchable native plant database with growing details

## Step 3 — Build Your Documentation File

- A plant inventory table: common name, scientific name, native status source, location in garden
- Dated photos of each plant and the full garden (update monthly)
- iNaturalist observation records (export or screenshot)

- A copy of the USDA PLANTS page or state society listing for each species
- Purchase receipts from native plant nurseries where available

## Commonly Confused: Native Plant vs. Look-Alike Weed

Native Plant (Keep & Document)	Common Look-Alike (Often Invasive)
Common Milkweed ( <i>Asclepias syriaca</i> )	Dogbane (similar leaves; milkweed has hairy stem)
Goldenrod ( <i>Solidago</i> spp.) — does NOT cause hay fever	Ragweed ( <i>Ambrosia</i> ) — the actual allergy culprit
New England Aster ( <i>Symphyotrichum novae-angliae</i> )	Daisy Fleabane (also native, but weedy appearance)
Wild Bergamot ( <i>Monarda fistulosa</i> )	Catnip / non-native mints
Black-Eyed Susan ( <i>Rudbeckia hirta</i> )	Non-native coreopsis cultivars

Tip: The goldenrod/ragweed confusion is the single most common misidentification in HOA complaints. Goldenrod's pollen is heavy and insect-carried — it does not cause hay fever. If a neighbor blames your goldenrod for allergies, the actual culprit is wind-pollinated ragweed, which blooms at the same time.

### Presenting Identification to Your HOA

When responding to a violation notice or submitting a variance request, present identification in this order: (1) plant inventory table, (2) native status citations (USDA PLANTS printouts carry the most weight), (3) photos, (4) field guide or extension office reference. This sequence moves from summary to evidence and reads professionally to boards, property managers, and — if it comes to it — attorneys and judges.

Provided by the HOA Native Plant Rights Hub — [hoa-native-plant-rights.com](http://hoa-native-plant-rights.com)

Disclaimer: This document provides informational guidance only and is not legal advice. Consult a qualified real estate attorney for advice specific to your situation.