

The Southampton Press

EASTERN EDITION

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SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

ONE DOLLAR



The Return Of The Native

BY LISA DAFFY

Ah, the satisfaction of gazing out upon your own private expanse of perfectly mowed, perfectly green lawn. For decades, the lawn has been more than a patch of grass, it's been a marker for success. Perhaps nothing says, "You have arrived," in suburban America like that green sprawl.

Does that badge of honor dim a little when you learn that the lawn as status symbol came about because wealthier landowners in the Middle Ages had more cows and sheep dining on their property than their neighbors did, thereby keeping their environs more closely cropped?

How about when you find out that the ideal of a perfect, clover-free lawn arose after World War II, when companies had large quantities of leftover herbicides to unload, and some marketing genius got the idea to convince homeowners that the only good lawn was a sterile lawn?

Kind of takes the fun out of it, huh?

"Lawns are my arch-nemesis," said Suzanne Ruggles, owner of the Westhampton Beach-based Barefoot Gardener, dedicated to installing and maintaining sustainable landscapes, largely through the use of native plants. "Lawns feed the ego-system, not the ecosystem."

Ms. Ruggles, who began handing out "Food, not lawns" buttons a quarter century ago, came very early to a party that is now in full swing. As communities across the country come to terms with water shortages, environmental toxins and large-scale die-offs of vital pollinators like honeybees and monarch butterflies, people are looking for ways to keep a beautiful yard that is also low-maintenance.

"People want a negative space," she said. "We want to be able to navigate the property, have a place for the kids to play ball. But you can have that without having a lawn that's a monoculture. There are no monocultures in nature. A lawn can be really any kind of vegetation that's mowed."

Which isn't to say that you can't have a grassy lawn and still maintain your environmental creds. You just might want to adjust your thinking about what makes a good lawn.

Welcoming well-adapted local plants back into the residential landscape

Before World War II, grass seed was sold with clover seed mixed in. Clover fixes nitrogen in the soil and generally makes for a healthier lawn. So step away from the herbicides and enjoy the visual interest that a little clover adds to the view. Use a mulching mower set to 3 to 3 1/2 inches and leave the clippings in the lawn. The taller grass shades the ground and keeps weeds from germinating; the clippings add nutrients back into the soil, making for a stronger, healthier lawn. Water infrequently, but for long periods, to encourage roots to go deep, which keeps the lawn from drying out too fast.

So once we get past the idea that a movie-set lawn is a must-have, we can move on to the rest of the property. Here on the East End, houses are springing up daily on land that has been woods or meadows for hundreds of years. Too often, developers clear-cut the lot, then fill it in with what Jim Glover calls "meatball plant landscapes—a privet hedge and a row of boxwoods. Thankfully, that idea is passing. It's really an outdated concept, and people now are looking beyond that."

Mr. Glover, owner of Glover Perennials, a wholesaler in Cutchogue, said he didn't start out with a focus on native plants, but "we realized this is an important part of our business, so we started to delve more deeply into it, and that's what we've been doing ever since. Now we're growing more than 200 native species."

With more wild landscapes being lost to development every year, the need for yards that support native plants and animals is becoming critical.

Glover provides native plants to garden centers across the East End, including Lynch's in Southampton, Marder's in Bridgehampton, East Hampton Gardens, Bayberry in Amagansett and Fort Pond Native Plants in Montauk.

Of course, "native" is a relative term, and doesn't necessarily mean only plants that exist in the wild on the South Fork. As a general guideline, if a plant grows wild within a

300-mile radius of your location, it's probably native enough to provide the benefits associated with natives.

So what are those benefits? Plants and animals have evolved over the eons to be in tune with one another. Local flowers produce nectar just in time for wild bee and butterfly populations to feed on them and grow strong enough to reproduce successfully. In turn, those bees and butterflies carry pollen from one flower to another, ensuring that those flowers survive. Wild shrubs produce berries in the fall that support migratory flocks of songbirds on their long journeys.

"Thankfully, the media attention on the plight of honeybees and monarch butterflies has hit home with people, and we're seeing that awareness extend to pollinators in general," said Mr. Glover. "The bottom line is we should all be striving to have a diversity of flowering plants that bloom at different times from last frost to first frost. People are beginning to understand that you can create a landscape that attracts and sustains wildlife, and at the same time have an amazing garden display of great beauty."

When a landscape is designed in tune with natural rhythms, one of the rewards is a yard full of songbirds. Shrubs that produce berries, for example, provide nesting sites for birds during the spring and summer, as well as food for migrating birds in the fall. Additionally, plants well suited to our climate and soil need less chemical intervention, creating a more welcoming environment for all kinds of insects the birds rely on in the spring and summer.

"Without bugs, you have no birds," Mr. Glover said. While seed is a great food source in the winter, in the spring, when birds are rearing their young, they need insects to feed those young, and to meet their own nutritional needs.

At Bridge Gardens, part of the Peconic Land Trust, garden manager Rick Bogusch is working to incorporate more native plantings into the 5-acre garden spot. "We're in transition from being an ornamental garden

to being more of a practical public garden with a public service mission," he said earlier this summer. "Our focus now is on using native plants and edible plants in a sustainable landscape."

"We want to show people that native plants can be just as attractive as non-native plants, and they're better for the environment," Mr. Bogusch continued. "One of my favorite examples is Virginia sweetspire. It's in bloom right now, grows about 3 to 5 feet tall, and has great color well into November."

None of the experts we spoke with is a purist—they recognize that our backyards are home to many non-native plants, and that's fine, as long as there's a balance. "We don't eat only native plants, and most of us aren't even native to America," said Ms. Ruggles. "I just planted a 20-acre meadow in Southampton. Eighty-five percent of the plants in that meadow are native, but there were some others the owner really wanted to include, and that's fine."

So how does one begin to transition to native landscaping? If you use a landscape company, ask them for recommendations. Call one of the local garden centers that carry a lot of natives and get their advice. Hit the internet or the library and do some research. Get your soil tested by Cornell Cooperative Extension in Riverhead (ccesuffolk.org) so you can choose plants suited for your space. Go to plantnative.org, where you can plug in your region and find a list of native trees, shrubs, perennials and groundcovers, as well as the features of those plants. Surprise yourself by finding native cultivars, or "nativars," that have the unique look you thought you could only get from an exotic. Start with a few plants—or renovate your whole yard.

"You wouldn't burn your own house down, but that's exactly what we're doing when we don't take care of our environment," said Ms. Ruggles. "The Dalai Lama said, 'Compassion is the new radicalism of our time,' and that's really what we're striving to exemplify in the way we garden—compassion toward the plants and animals that live here. When we save them, we're saving ourselves as well."

"When I started down this road, we were the freaks and outcasts," Ms. Ruggles said. "Now the idea of incorporating native plants into the landscape is becoming mainstream, and it's wonderful."