



Native Plant

The Value of Gardening with Native Plants

MYTHBUSTERS

By Patrick Goggin, Lakes Specialist, UW-Extension Lakes

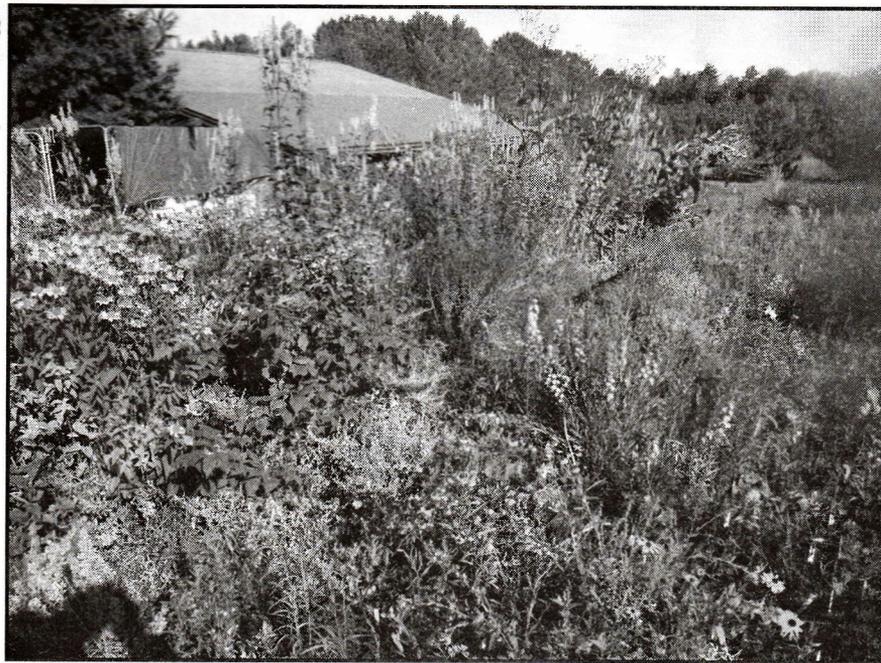
People around North America are planting more native gardens. Native grasses, sedges, rushes, wildflowers, ferns, shrubs and trees bolster habitat for wildlife, conserve water and beautify our home landscapes. These native gardens can provide a natural privacy fence, offer migratory birds food and shelter and support pollinators in dire need of nectar and host plants. Native gardens are even used beyond home landscapes, such as at hospitals and mental health clinics, to aid in faster healing from many different ailments. But even with all these benefits, replacing lawn areas with natives still has its barriers. Convincing homeowners to make the switch to native plants can be a tough sell, mainly because of the perception that lawns are elegant while natives are messy.

But one man, Doug Tallamy, is trying to change this perception by helping people understand the many values of gardening with native plants. As a professor of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware, he is on a mission to change the definition of what our home landscapes can be nowadays.

Tallamy, a passionate voice in America's native plant movement, advocates minimizing lawn to make room for trees, shrubs, flowers and ground covers that are native to a particular region. He reasons that these home-grown plants are just as beautiful as the non-natives that dominate many of our nurseries and landscapes. Natives are also more lake friendly.

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Photo by Patrick Goggin



Most common, non-native landscaping plants have a matching native alternative with similar leaves, flowers, size and shape.

This Northwoods native planting supports birds, butterflies, bats and moths, and displays colorful blooms throughout Wisconsin's changing seasons.

The Foley's enjoy their beautiful view of Beaver Dam Lake through a native garden planted as part of the Healthy Lakes initiative. The bird bath and stepping stones add a decorative touch.



However, not everybody is on board with this growing native gardening movement. Some hesitate to begin native planting projects based on what Tallamy says is the movement's biggest challenge: overcoming eight myths that discourage people from using native plants in their home landscapes.

designers call *cues to care*. Patio pavers or mulch can frame plant bed edges or create a flowing pathway, and whimsical sculptures can add visual interest. Wildlife feeders and houses invite furry and feathered neighbors, and natural seating areas or benches create a space to enjoy your garden.



This native backyard planting not only shields views from the neighbors, but also provides an area for little human explorers and a fantastic bird and butterfly habitat.

Myth 1: Natives Are Messy

There are tricks to using native plants without sacrificing a tidy-looking garden. Cultivate dense layers and groupings of different species instead of single plants. This creates a clean look while maximizing the biodiversity that the landscape provides. Put a small patch of lawn only where you will walk, then plant everything else to create tidy outdoor rooms of natives. Ground covers can provide the floors, woody plants like medium-sized shrubs and small trees build the walls, and the arching limbs of trees and taller shrubs create the ceilings. Make it personal by including what landscape

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Myth 2: Density Is Ugly

Some feel that dense plantings cannot be attractive. This may be true of single-species hedges, but a rich mix of natives staggered along a property line can create vivid, living walls that look great and create natural fencing. Tallamy recommends a mix of plants such as dogwoods, hazelnuts, maples, birches, viburnums and oaks. Mix in some conifers too. You might also try vines like virgin's bower, rock clematis and American bittersweet. Ostrich, sensitive and cinnamon ferns can be great choices for wet areas. These combos yield year-round interest and provide food and shelter for native insects, birds and small mammals.

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Photos by Paul Skawinski



Before



After

Myth 3: Natives Cannot Be Formal

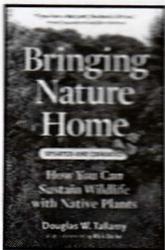
“Formality is a function of the design, not the plant species,” says Tallamy. Several of our Wisconsin botanical gardens, nature centers and arboreta have formal native gardens exhibiting the rich color palette and diverse structural forms found in Midwestern native flora.

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Myth 4: Insects Destroy Natives

Tallamy’s studies, highlighted in his book Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants, show that native plants suffer no greater damage from plant-eating pests than do non-natives. They may, in fact, be healthier because they foster a more balanced ecosystem. Natives host many indigenous plant-eating insects such as caterpillars and grasshoppers, but these plant eaters in turn attract native predators such as birds, assassin bugs, praying mantises, beetles and parasitic wasps. These beneficial critters help keep the insects under control. In contrast, imported non-natives, such as honeysuckles and barberries, host non-native pests that have few predators.

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Myth 5: Natives Attract Vermin

Many people worry that natives attract unwelcome visitors such as rats and snakes. But all plants – native or not – will attract wildlife, including bees that may sting or birds that may splatter the car. To counter irrational fears of vermin, Tallamy notes that in 2012 only one person in the nation died from a snake bite, whereas 791 were killed by toasters and 33,000 by the common cold. Still, fear of snakes likely outweighs a fear of toasters, so this myth may die hard. Here in Wisconsin, the snakes in our native gardens are likely to be nonthreatening to humans, such as green, garter, milk and red-bellied snakes.

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This rain garden has a rich mix of beautiful native flowers, and it keeps the yard from flooding when it rains!

Myth 6: Non-natives Are Prettier

No one can categorically claim that native plants are more attractive than non-natives, but it’s hard to deny the beauty of the spires of purple blazing star, clusters of red cardinal flowers, masses of sky-blue lobelia, or patches of pink Joe Pye weed. Most common, non-native landscaping plants have a matching native alternative with similar leaves, flowers, size and shape. Beyond beauty, natives that bloom from April to October support pollinators, while native woody and herbaceous plants sequester carbon, provide shade and support a range of birds and other species.

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Convention Highlight

Pamela Toshner, Lake Biologist with the DNR, along with citizens involved in the Healthy Lakes Initiative, will be offering a workshops on April 5, during the Wisconsin Lakes Partnership Convention. Read the details on page 11.

Photo by Paul Skawinski



Where do I buy native plants?

Search “native plant nurseries” on the dnr.wi.gov website to get a Wisconsin listing, or go directly to this link: <http://dnr.wi.gov/files/pdf/pubs/er/er0698.pdf>

Myth 7: Neighbors Scorn Natives

Neighbors scorn mess, regardless of the source. “The problem with the native plant movement is that people think they can stop mowing their lawns and just sprinkle seeds from prairie-in-a-can,” says Tallamy. “But we’re not suggesting you abandon landscaping. You do have to fit in with the cultural norms.” Well-tended native plantings can be tidy and beautiful enough to please the neighbors, not to mention the hummingbirds and butterflies.

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Myth 8: Natives Are Costly

“Of all the myths, this is the least mythy,” says Tallamy. Mass-produced non-natives like impatiens are cheap, and that economy of scale does not yet exist for many natives, which are often sold by conservation groups to raise revenue. Still, an acorn from a native oak is free, and neighbors may be willing to share cuttings, seeds or divided roots of fast-spreading natives like bergamot, dwarf honeysuckle, snowberries, golden Alexanders, columbine, cup-plants or penstemons. Also, many Wisconsin nurseries now specialize in offering affordable Midwestern native species. 💧

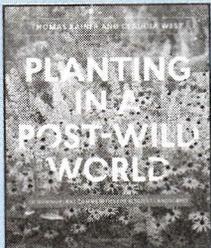
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Native Plant Resources

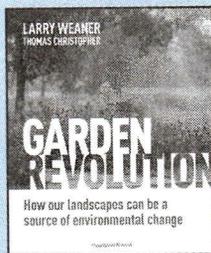


If you would like to connect with others interested in the native plant movement or would just like to learn more about it, the *Wild Ones* website is a great place to start. www.wildones.org

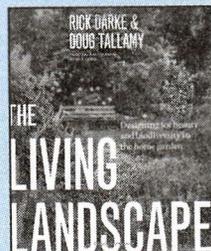
If you would like to read more about the native plant movement, check out these books:



Planting in a Post-wild World: Designing Plant Communities for Resilient Landscapes by *Thomas Rainer and Claudia West*

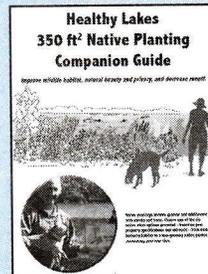


Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change by *Larry Weaner and Thomas Christopher*

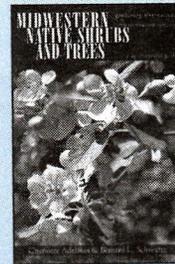


The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden by *Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy*

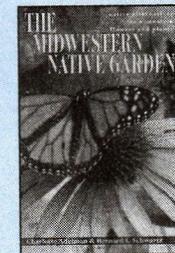
If you are looking for assistance and ideas in planning and installing your own native plant project, check out these timely resources.



The recently updated Healthy Lakes 350 ft² Native Planting Companion Guide has six example planting plans: lakeshore edge, bird and butterfly, bare soil/erosion control, woodland, low growing and deer resistant. Check it out at the Healthy Lakes web site: <http://healthylakes.com>



Midwestern Native Shrubs and Trees: Gardening Alternatives to Nonnative Species is a new book being published in March 2017. This is a companion piece to the best-selling native plant guide The Midwestern Native Garden: Native Alternatives to Nonnative Flowers and Plants by *Charlotte Adelman and Bernard Schwartz*.



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