

Wildly Civilized: Native Plants for the Well-Ordered Yard

BY TOM SPRINGER

PHOTOS BY MARK BUGNASKI

From a passing pontoon boat on Base Line Lake, it's the bubble-gum pink heads of Joe Pye weed that make Jan Arps-Prundeanu's beach stand out. They grow on leggy green stalks as tall as the gardener who planted them. And if plants can look friendly, then these surely do – they nod a gentle welcome in the late afternoon breeze.

Friendly, yes, but also a little subversive. Because for Jan, the Joe Pye weed and other native plants in her lakefront garden offer a quiet contrast to the socially accepted status quo. Which on a midwestern lake, usually means turf grass that runs right down to the water's edge.

"My main goal was to help the lake be as healthy as possible," said Jan, a retired social worker. "I wanted to prevent the fertilizer runoff from lawns that makes weeds grow in the lake. I wanted it to look pretty, but also serve a natural purpose."

The result is a 750-square foot buffer strip of native plants that's





part garden, part mini-wildlife sanctuary. Today, it's alive with butterflies – monarchs, Eastern tiger swallowtails and Aphrodite fritillaries. They flit from purple coneflowers to blue lobelia, along with honeybees, bumblebees and ruby-throated hummingbirds. It looks natural, but accessible. There's a Y-shaped path of flagstones, and a fresh layer of bark mulch to keep the weeds at bay.

"All the butterflies and frogs and turtles have returned since we planted this. And the *smell*," Jan said, as she drew a deep, contented breath. "It all smells so much better now."

Jan and Octavian "Tavi" Prundeanu, her Romanian-born husband, share a

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rambling, 1900s home on Base Line Lake. On this Saturday in August, Tavi has just returned from a business trip of sorts. He flies World War II bombers to air shows as a pilot for the Yankee Air Museum. But at home, he's clearly not the captain of what grows along the waterfront.

"This area is mine – Tavi doesn't mess with it," Jan said. He was "done with the garden" after carting endless wheelbarrows of soil to establish the beds for his late wife, Marti, in the 90s. Marti planted a butterfly garden that included

many bee balm plants and other natives. Yet the garden had been left unattended for more than three years and Jan found it unattractive; she laboriously pulled out what she considered weeds. This included Joe Pye weed, which Jan wasn't fond of at first: it was called a **weed**. Then over time, as Jan grew more concerned about the lake's health, she learned to see its ecological benefits. "It's funny how your concept of 'pretty' can change when you learn to appreciate a plant for what it does, not just how it looks."



An epiphany of sorts came when Jan met landscaper Janee Kronk at a 2017 conference hosted by the Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership. Janee specializes in native landscapes, rain gardens and green roofs. "I wasn't familiar with native plants," said Jan, who grew up on a dairy farm in Ohio. "But I liked them, because they could survive in the existing soil and not need fertilizer."



On this day, Janee stopped by for a visit bearing two plug trays of vervain, a purple wetland wildflower. Summer stylish in a bright yellow dress, she was soon barefoot and calf-deep in her native element: an inland lake. She looked approvingly at the dense tangle of Joe Pye weed roots, which have stood firm against the waves to protect the shore from erosion.

Janee sees her business as part plant installation and part ecological education. She knows that big lawns can harm lakes, but doesn't hit people over the head with that knowledge.

"I try to get people excited about natural shorelines in a way that doesn't shame them," said Janee, who teaches elementary school during the off season. "When people hear you say that they're doing something wrong, they tend to quit listening."





Instead, Janee helps customers use native plants in ways that suit their preference and circumstances. For Jan, that means a modicum of control over what goes where.

"As much as I want a natural shoreline, I still want order," said Jan. "I like to plant things in neat clumps; it's part of my German heritage! The hardest part has been finding where things should go. The garden has varying levels of nutrients, so I move things around a lot. If they're not happy, I find a place where they are happy."

Can good ideas, like roots and seeds, spread from one lake property to the next? They've done so at the Prundeanu's. Their next-door neighbors now have their own native garden by the water, planted by Janee.

"That's why demonstration plantings like Jan's are so important," Janee said. "Keeping up with the Joneses is a good thing when it encourages people to protect the environment."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There's no need to replace all non-native plants with natives. Jan has a mixture of both.
- Stepping stones can be easily moved as the garden grows – cement walkways cannot!
- It's OK to stake or prune native plants, should they become too tall and weedy.
- Study your plants often to find which ones attract the wild creatures you like best.