

For a Wild Life, Let Natives Bring Wildlife to You

BY TOM SPRINGER PHOTOS BY MARK BUGNASKI

Landscaping a lawn with perennials bought from a chain store might look easier than using native plants. The familiar hostas and day lilies are in one aisle, the lawn fertilizer and dandelion killer in another. Take it all home, dig some holes, plop it in, unroll some sod and voila – an American yard attained.

By contrast, native plants require a little outside-the-big-box thinking. With names like Joe Pye weed and big bluestem, they can sound like something out of Little House on the Prairie. And given their wild origins, there's a (false) perception that runaway natives will turn a neat yard into a Jumanji-like nightmare.

Yet Susan Houseman, a convert from common perennials to natives, has learned otherwise.

For one thing, nurseries that specialize in natives are staffed by helpful experts who sell *only* natives – not stoves, sinks or 2x4s. And while natives may require more





research upfront, they're a better bargain in the long run. They offer more changing beauty across the seasons. They attract more bees, birds, butterflies and other wildlife than non-native plants. They need no fertilizer and little watering, which means far less upkeep than store-bought perennials – a key selling point for Susan.

"I have a busy personal and professional life, and spend less time on my yard than most people do," said Susan, a labor economist. "But I can do all the maintenance on our native gardens over two or three weekend days in the spring."

Susan and her husband bought their house on Little Long Lake in 2000. It sits atop a ridge, with a horizontal layout that provides commanding views of the lake below. "My four kids

"Perhaps the truth depends on a walk around the lake." – WALLACE STEVENS

loved to sled here, it's a 40-foot drop to the water," said Susan. "When the snow was fast, they'd shoot right out onto the ice."

Despite its exalted location, the yard was Midwest-ordinary when they moved in. A non-descript lawn rolled to the lake, and at the waterfront, a thicket of multiflora rose and other invasive species blocked their view of the water. Susan, who had lived in town "but always been a gardener attuned to environmental issues," decided to give nature the upper hand.

"We got rid of maybe half our lawn and turned the rest into native garden," she said. They hired a

native plant consultant to plan and prepare the landscaping. Susan doesn't believe it's essential to hire a landscaper for all the work – she and her son planted much of their gardens. But she says landscapers can offer great advice about which plants are best suited for which locations.

Nonetheless, going native did require that Susan shed some of her neatnik-gardener ways.

"At first, my image of native gardens was that they'd be like perennial gardens, very well-organized" she said. "I'd get upset if something shifted around and crowded out another plant."



Then she talked to Steve Keto, a native plant guru. In guru fashion, Susan found his advice both wise and simple: “He told me that, ‘No, nature will do what it wants. You put in the plants, and they’ll sort themselves out and grow where they grow best.’”

The plants on the high ground include coneflowers and lead plant, brown-eyed susans and pale Indian plantain. And most striking, cup plants that reach a Jumanji-like height of eight feet. By the shore, there are moisture-lovers such as blue lobelia, Monkey flower, cardinal flower and blue flag iris. All told, natives cover all 300 feet of the shoreline. They’ve turned a once sterile yard into a haven for green herons, great blue herons and belted kingfishers – along with wild turkeys and a resident deer herd. In spring, a spiny softshell turtle scales the hill to lay her eggs in the flower beds. Baltimore orioles and indigo buntings add bright darts of orange and cobalt blue.

But for all they’ve done on their 3.5 acres, such restoration begs a question about the rest of the 186-acre lake: How do you convince a critical mass of lakefront owners to use native landscaping – instead of a select few? On Little Long Lake, the key has been education and positive peer pressure. A local water quality group has spread the word about natives, and how they help prevent the runoff and algae blooms that plague nearby lakes. And when neighbors see the beauty and utility of native plants in that light, it makes them eager to plant their own.





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“Our lake is under pressure now for development,” Susan said. “But when you see a new house put in a native buffer strip, it sets the tone for others to follow. Increasingly, we see that people want to keep their shorelines natural.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Use native plants in your landscaping to save time and effort.
- Nature will do what it wants - plants will sort themselves out and grow where they're best suited.
- Be the change you want to see and set an example for your neighbors with your landscaping.
- Find a good native plant nursery (near you or online) and ask plenty of questions.
- Share plants with curious neighbors so they can start a native garden on a small scale.