

Keeping the garden native

BY KATHY VAN MULLEKOM



ECOLOGY is on many gardeners' minds these days. Gardeners who value the science of relationships between living things and their environments increasingly want to know more about those connections – how toxic chemicals worsen a yard's overall health and why bees, birds and butterflies are crucial to our daily lives, for example.

“We have a responsibility to support the land that we depend on for our own survival, and that responsibility includes thoughtful choices about how we landscape our own tiny spot of Earth,” says Carol Heiser, habitat education coordinator with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. She encourages public, private and corporate landowners to provide habitat for songbirds, mammals, amphibians and other native wildlife.

“Insects and plants co-evolved for millennia and have developed intricate inter-relationships. Unfortunately, over the past 300-plus years, we've replaced a substantial portion of the natural landscape with non-native plant species from other continents and the result has been an altering of the food web,” she says.

“This, in turn, has had the effect of depressing insect populations that depend on specific ecosystem patterns, along with an associated decline in bird populations which rely on insects to feed their young. Although land clearing and development are certainly contributing factors to the loss of

habitat, the introduction of non-native species has had an insidious but far-reaching, deleterious outcome.”

Habitat gardening, which is more accurately called conservation landscaping, around homes is one way of “putting back”, or making an attempt to mimic the original native plant community, she continues. This means removing exotic invasive plant species and replacing them with native species.

To acquaint yourself with habitat gardening, Heisers suggests you first go online to look at photos of invasive exotic plants and learn to identify them. Then, take a clipboard and walk your yard, listing any invasive plants.

“When that list is done, make another column of all the other non-natives that aren’t invasive but exotic just the same. You’ll probably be surprised that most of your favourite ‘ornamentals’ are non-native,” she says.

“They’re called ‘ornamental’ because they’re just that: decorations without any biological purpose.”

Next, go back online to find out what native species are best for your growing needs, she advises. Select one non-native plant species in your yard, remove it and replace it with a native species.

“After you’ve installed the native species, pay close attention throughout the growing season to what insects you’ve never seen before that are now visiting these new plants,” she says.

“This should give you a huge sense of pride that you have done a good thing, because you’ve just added more insects for young birds to get their protein. Congratulations, you are now a ‘grandparent’.”

Finally, repeat the removing and planting process every year for the next several years — until your yard has been converted into a native plant landscape.

“Keep a journal of the insect species that visit your yard, which will represent an increase in biodiversity and evidence of your success,” she says.

“You can expect a renewed sense of personal connection to nature, knowing that you’ve taken part in ... even if only a very small way ... a change in our landscape ‘culture’.”

More information on conservation landscaping is available at: www.nwf.org, www.nativeplantcenter.net, www.abfnet.org, www.bringingnaturehome.net, www.dgif.virginia.gov/habitat. — Daily Press/McClatchy Tribune Information Services