

Native Plants and Wildlife in the Garden

Gaye Mara, Fairfax County Master Gardener

Once in a great while, our own self-interest coincides with the greater good. For the gardener, growing native plants is just such a case. A garden filled with plants that are native to the local area benefits both the gardener and the environment in important ways:

- *There is less work and expense to maintain the garden.* Because our native plants evolved in this environment, they are especially well adapted to the natural conditions here – the soil, the weather, the “critters” both large and small, helpful and harmful. They therefore thrive with little help from us, which means no mowing and much less watering, fertilizing, and pest control.
- *It conserves resources and reduces pollution.* Less watering reduces water consumption; less mowing reduces air pollution; less use of fertilizers and pesticides reduces harmful runoff into our waterways.
- *It supports native wildlife.* Our native plants co-evolved with our native wildlife, and they depend on each other – the plants for pollination and seed dispersal, the critters for food and shelter.

In Kingstowne, where I live, the front, side, and back yards of my neighbor Judith are filled with native plants, along with a few favorite non-natives. There is no lawn to mow. Her back yard is an urban oasis, with a two-level deck overlooking a small pond surrounded by trees, grasses, flowers, and creeping groundcovers. Two small compost piles mature in an out-of-the-way corner.

She says her garden is a work in progress: “I don’t believe in growing things that are difficult to grow. If they don’t like it here, I yank them out and try something else.” Over the 13 years she has lived here, she has continuously edited her plant inventory, regretfully eliminating vegetables entirely because “they get eaten.” She has compiled a list of the resulting tried-and-true native plants, which is reproduced below.

While she appreciates the easy-care qualities of native plants, for Judith the greatest reward of a wildlife-friendly garden is the wildlife itself. Butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds busily work the flowers; songbirds nest in the trees; frogs and dragonflies linger by the pond. Large birds of prey – hawks, peregrine falcons – come as close as her back fence. Black snakes visit occasionally, and they, too, are welcome since they “eat the bad critters.”



Judith in her sunny side yard

Aphids and slugs also visit. About that she says, “Basically, I try not to let it bother me.” She avoids chemical pest controls, letting beneficial insects and other natural predators keep the pests in bounds.

Judith is one of many Fairfax County residents whose garden is certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat. She encourages others to apply for certification. The requirements are not onerous, and the rewards are great. If enough residents in a single community are certified, it can be certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat (Arlington and Reston have already achieved that distinction). See www.nwf.org/backyard for more information about this program.



Judith's back yard

Judith's Tried and True Native Plants for Fairfax County Gardeners

Bee balm, *Monarda didyma*
Black-eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia hirta*
Butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*
Climbing hydrangea, *Decumaria barbara*
Columbine, *Aquilegia canadensis*
Creeping phlox, *Phlox stolonifera*
Dogwood, *Cornus florida*
Fernleaf yarrow, *Achillea filipendulina*
Foamflower, *Tiarella cordifolia*
Goldenrod, *Solidago* (various species)
New England aster, *Aster novae-angliae*
Purple coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*
Sugar maple, *Acer saccharum*
Summer phlox, *Phlox paniculata*
Sundrops, *Oenothera fruticosa*
Swamp milkweed, *Asclepias incarnata*
Virginia creeper, *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*
Virginia spiderwort, *Tradescantia virginiana*
Wild stonecrop, *Sedum ternatum*

More Resources on Native Plants

Meadowlark Gardens, Vienna, VA (www.nvrpa.org/meadowlark.html) – Visit Meadowlark’s Potomac Valley Native Plant Collection to see local native plants growing in a natural setting.

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
(www.dcr.virginia.gov/dnh/native.htm) – Web pages on “Native Plants for Conservation, Restoration and Landscaping”

Virginia Native Plant Society (www.vnps.org) – Information and additional resources on local native plants.