

Native gardens are turning heads

A few years ago, a lot of folks would have said, "Look at that big patch of weeds over there. Wonder why those folks don't cut that thing down?" Today, that "patch of weeds" may be the focus of a magazine or newspaper article, its owners being lauded for their efforts to recreate the look of our lands some 500 years ago.

As the first settlers reached the shores of North America, from Canada to the Southern Plains, they encountered thousands of square miles of columbine, milkweeds, wild strawberries, asters and cornflowers. These grew among tall stands of Canada wild rye grass, switch grass, bottlebrush grass and little bluestem. In time, these lands were cleared, tilled and cultivated, and the pioneer plants eradicated as threats to the much needed crops. Thank goodness the plants didn't disappear; though, like the native bison, many came close to extermination. Today, many gardeners and homeowners are recognizing the beauty and ecological necessity of growing these previously discarded plants.

From Arizona to Saskatchewan, native plant gardens are springing up in greater numbers, and their unbridled, untamed beauty is turning heads.

Native plants gardens are more than just a thing of natural beauty, however. The native plants are naturally, over the course of centuries, disease-resistant, and they attract other native birds, mammals and fauna. A garden of native plants, no matter how recently grown, will attract butterflies, moths and a whole array of diverse wildlife.

Some landowners are dedicating a large amount of space to native gardens, but others are starting with just small

plots measuring as little as 15 feet in circumference. These gardens show up as sprays of unusual texture and color against traditional lawns and garden areas, inviting long gazes from passers-by. Those who have grown these gardens for years have learned what plants grow at certain heights, thus allowing them to make certain all of the plants can be seen at one time.

When planting a native garden, some research is required. Check your local library or online sources to discover the various species of native plants and their availability; there should be thousands to choose from. Most areas of North America had varieties of both tall and short grasses, and plenty of wildflowers. You will be able to pick and choose the height, depth and colors for your garden with ease.

Native gardens thrive best in an area where they are afforded full sun. Avoid putting in a garden near a canopy of trees as well, as some tree species will compete against the garden, though white oak is noted as being harmonious with native prairie plants. Keep the garden contained and away from structures, as during dry periods of the summer there is the potential of a fire hazard from tall grasses.

To get the area ready for a native planting, the soil should be thoroughly cleared. Pull up the sod, till the area by hand or machine and cover it with a tarp for a week or two during warm weather. This should kill any pernicious weeds. Once the garden is planted, it's unlikely that you'll be seeing any weeds of that nature, as your native garden will prove much stronger.

—By Daniel Aspell



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