

Eco-Friendly Gardening

By Mark Gilliland for the Hudson Independent

With Michelle Obama starting an organic garden at the White House, shouldn't we all care about being eco-friendly in our own gardening practices? Why? In order to protect the health of our families, friends and future generations; to safeguard our native plants and animals by protecting their habitat and food supply; to improve the overall quality of our local environment by preventing excessive soil erosion, ensuring a healthy tree canopy to combat global warming, and reducing the risk of water contamination by fertilizer and pesticide runoff.

Becoming an eco-friendly gardener is easier than you think. The first step is to change your mindset. Your garden is more than a collection of flowers, paths, decks and shrubbery: It's a habitat, a home for beneficial animals like birds, bees and butterflies. Is your garden designed to attract and support them? Does it feature some local flowers whose nectar they can sip? Are there brushy areas where birds can safely nest? A good goal to set is to choose about 50% of your plantings from among regionally native species (or their cultivars), which helps support the locally evolved food web. [See *SIDEBAR* for a sampling of native plants.] Even the soil itself participates in the food web, as it is rich with insects, microorganisms and fungi that help release nutrients from the soil. If you kill them, you kill the soil!

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Regional Natives with High Wildlife Value

Trees:

Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)
American Holly (*Ilex opaca*)
Easter Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
White Pine (*Pinus strobus*)
White Oak (*Quercus alba*)

Shrubs and small trees:

Shadbush (*Amelanchier arborea*)
Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*)
Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)
American Elderberry (*Sambucus Canadensis*)
Arrow-wood (*Viburnum dentatum*)

Perennials, ferns and vines:

Ladyfern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)
Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)
New York Aster (*Aster novi-belgii*)
Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*)
Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)
Bee Balm (*Monarda didyma*)
Trumpet Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*)
Goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*)

To learn what your soil really needs (and what's a waste or even counter-productive to add) have it analyzed. Call the Cornell Cooperative Extension in Valhalla: 914-285-4620 to get instructions. The entire process is simple, fast and costs only \$15. You'll learn your soil's pH (how acid it is), soil type & structure, nutrient content, and so forth. Add only those fertilizers or other amendments the report says you need (you'll save money and protect the

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environment), and try to go organic-based slow release fertilizers, including bone meal, green sand and other natural amendments. In addition, compost, compost, compost! If you don't want to buy compost, keep a small pile--you'll reduce your garbage while you build and maintain your soil. Throw on your fall leaves, grass cuttings, old vegetables and produce scraps. (Don't add any meat or dairy—that will make the pile smell bad and potentially introduce harmful bacteria.) Mulch your beds 2-3" deep with your compost, shredded leaves or other organically rich commercial mixture (such as Fundy Blend enriching mulch by Coast of Maine).

Avoid using pesticides. Train yourself to tolerate a little bit of insect damage, but if bugs get too destructive, try horticultural oil, insecticidal soap or neem—or simply spray bugs such as aphids off your plants with a hose. Set out beer traps to catch slugs. Try introducing beneficial insects, such as ladybugs and tiny predatory wasps, which eat aphids, larvae and other pests. Mammals, too, will certainly take their piece of the garden pie, so use organic repellants (such as Deer Solution or Deer Stopper) and fencing to minimize overly aggressive browsing. Be understanding: there is a complex food web at work in and around your garden beds. No garden can be completely bug-free. If simple solutions don't work, treat an insect problem with a specific remedy so as to minimize side effects on other insects and microbes. Read labels before applying anything! Consult with your local garden center, nursery or the Cornell Extension helpline before using any over-the-counter pesticides.

Interestingly enough, some plants can be more destructive to your garden and to our local habitat than insects. They crowd out local (native) plants and don't feed local birds or insects, so they're a double-whammy to the environment. Learn to identify and remove invasive plants in your garden beds and in surrounding woodland or scrub areas of your yard. [See *SIDEBAR* for a list of *invasive plants in our region.*] Ask your neighbors to do the same, explaining that by doing so, they are helping to protect our native butterflies, songbirds, and the forest itself.

Top Ten Invasive Plants in Our Region

Burning Bush (*Euonymus alatus*)
Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)
Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)
Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*)
Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*)
Multiflora Rose (*Rosa multiflora*)
Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*)
Oriental Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*)
Porcelain Berry Vine (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*)
Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*)

Learn proper care of your plants including how and when to deadhead or cut back perennials (and whether or not to leave them "up" - uncut - for a winter-time food source); how and when to properly prune your shrubs (with a focus on removing dead and diseased wood first); when to water (using drip irrigation to minimize evaporation and water waste). Take care that your automatic irrigation system is set to

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function in a reasonable, water-conscious manner. There is no need to water after a good rainfall. And water needs change by the month/season.

Reserve some areas of your property as undisturbed natural buffers, where possible. Let the fall leaf litter lie under your trees or wooded margins to break down naturally. Stop using leaf blowers to remove every scrap of fallen leaf debris from your beds and groundcover areas. By not cutting back in the fall, you'll allow native seeds and berries to be produced and consumed. Leave some shrubby brush areas, brush piles and dead or downed trees – all of which provide protection and winter shelter for birds, animals and insects. Hang up birdhouses in safe locations. And if possible, supply a source of water, such as a bird-bath. Keep it fresh and larvae-free by changing the water every few days (if it is not free-running).

Taken as a whole, these techniques and methods will help you and your garden achieve an eco-friendly natural balance. You'll feel good about helping our planet in seemingly small, yet effective ways. All of which will grow into making a big difference as more and more of us (your neighbors) follow suit. The birds, bees and butterflies will thank you.

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