



Plant a Native Landscape

The average suburban property contains a lot of lawn that really isn't used for anything. You can make a valuable contribution to the environment by replacing unnecessary lawn in your yard with trees, shrubs and perennials. Evaluate your lifestyle. Decide how much lawn you really need and where you need it. If you have small, active children you may need a large lawn but if you only use your yard for sunbathing, a few hundred square feet of lawn should be plenty. Consider having more than one lawn area - perhaps a small but beautifully manicured patch of lawn that acts as an extension of a patio with a separate area of rough lawn on which your kids can play.

As you plan your yard, try not to think of the lawn as the canvas upon which you place your planting beds. Instead, picture your lawn as a central opening surrounded by planting beds. Give it a distinct shape -- an oval or kidney shape or perhaps a gracious serpentine that flows through your yard. Then surround the lawn with planting beds that enclose and define it. That way, your lawn becomes a designed space -- a "place to be".



Cornus florida



Baptisia australis

Get to know each area of lawn you plan to replace. Is it shady there or sunny? Moist or dry? Is the soil sandy or heavy clay? Once you know the site conditions, choose plants that are adapted to grow there. Use plants native to the Delaware Valley whenever possible. Native plants (plants growing here prior to the arrival of the European colonists) are just as threatened as wildlife by development. And because native plants co-evolved with our wildlife they are often better sources of food and shelter than introduced plants. By including native plants in your yard you help to ensure both their survival and the survival of the birds, animals and insects that depend upon them.

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If you would like to reduce your lawn area but still keep a traditional, "normal" looking yard, replace lawn with flowerbeds, shrub borders and sweeps of groundcover. If you are comfortable with a more relaxed, natural look, one of the most rewarding things you can do is to recreate natural communities of plants. In the shade of a large tree, plant a woodland community of understory trees, ferns and wildflowers. Plant meadow perennials and grasses in a dry, sunny area. Plant a wetland community in a wet, marshy area.

When you replace areas of lawn with the communities of native plants that would naturally occur there, you really are restoring the environment. In an amazingly short period of time, birds and animals will thank you by moving into the new habitat you have created.

For further reading on native plants:

There are many books available to help you learn more about using native plants.

- ***The Wild Lawn Handbook* by Stevie Daniels is specifically about lawn alternatives.**
- **Ann Lovejoy has written a nice book about gardening and backyard design entitled *Further Down the Garden Path*.**
- **The Brooklyn Botanic Garden has published several excellent booklets about native plants and naturalistic landscaping, including: *The Environmental Gardener*, *Going Native*, and *Gardening with Wildflowers & Native Plants*.**
- **Other books that I have found useful include *Landscaping with Wildflowers* by Jim Wilson, *Growing and Propagating Showy Native Woody Plants* by Richard E. Bir, *Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers* by Harry R. Phillips and *The Native Plant Primer* by Carole Ottesen.**



Itea virginica

This fact sheet was written by Riverkeeper member and volunteer Brita van Rossum. Brita is an avid gardener who has used the techniques described above in her own back yard. Her interest in native plants stems from a life-long appreciation of the beauty of native wild flowers. She says that using native plants just makes sense, "We should use plants that developed here and are adapted to local climate and conditions rather than tulips from Turkey". Brita is currently studying toward a degree in Landscape Architecture at Temple University's Ambler Campus. Temple's program in Landscape Architecture places special emphasis on the use of native plants.