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Nature Watch



Wood thrush numbers are declining steeply as alien plants take over our gardens and forests.

Gardeners should replace alien plants with natives

By / By Gerry Rising

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Several months ago, the redoubtable Nancy Smith of the Western New York Land Conservancy loaned me her copy of Douglas Tallamy's "Bringing Nature Home." She was so enthusiastic about it that I reluctantly promised to read it. The book sat on my shelf until a week ago, when I decided that I owed Nancy at least a scan of its contents. Within 10 minutes, I realized that this is one of the most important nature books published in my lifetime. I urge everyone interested in our role on this planet to read it. I only hope its message will be conveyed to homeowners.

Tallamy's message may seem simplistic. He urges homeowners to purchase native plants for our gardens and to replace the alien plants already there with natives. I think all of us support that general idea. We would like to promote native plants as a kind of ecological patriotism.

alien plant supports no such community. What does this mean? Consider two examples. First, the beach grass (phragmites) that is taking over our marshlands from our native cattails. In its native Australia, phragmites supports 170 species of herbivores, here it supports five. That's the alien downside. A single species, our native black cherry, supports 400 herbivore species.

But Tallamy, an entomologist, places the idea in its larger context. Each native plant supports a wildlife community; an

Your first reaction may be: Wait a minute, most of those herbivores are bugs, and who wants more bugs? The answer is: We should all want them. Many of those insects turn out to be the larvae of beautiful moths or butterflies. Those and others also serve as food for birds.

If you want birds in your garden during their breeding season, you need to have insects for them to feed on. They are necessary to support the birds' increased energy needs for reproduction and the growth of their young. After a winter of feeding many bird species, when spring arrives, you may feel that the birds have abandoned you. This is very likely because either you lack native plants with their associated insects or you use insecticides to suppress insects.

Because they provide so little sustenance to the biotic community, alien plants lead to sterile gardens, and Tallamy tells us that a sterile garden "is teetering on the brink of destruction. It can no longer function as a dynamic community of interacting organisms. Its checks and balances are gone. Instead, the sterile garden's continued existence depends entirely on the frantic efforts of the gardener alone."

Of course, what applies to our gardens applies to our parks and woodlands, as well. Tallamy writes: “A healthy woodland is a collection of plants and animals that are more or less in balance. Yes, there are insect herbivores eating the plants that grow there, but keeping those herbivores in check are dozens of species of insect predators, parasites and diseases. These, in turn, are eaten daily by the birds, amphibians, and small mammals that reside, or simply hunt in the woodlot. With rare exceptions, no one member of the food chain dominates another; if one species in an essentially sound system does start to run rampant, it is soon brought into equilibrium by the other members of the community.”

We need to change our thinking of gardens and parks from collections of individual plants to wildlife communities. I urge you to begin replacing the aliens in your gardens with natives. You can get help in identifying native plants from these nurseries: Lockwood’s Greenhouses & Nursery in Hamburg, Johnson’s Nursery in East Aurora, Ben Brook Farm in Amherst, Amanda’s Garden in Springwater and Murray Brothers in Orchard Park.

Comments

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Excellent article, Gerry! Glad you’re helping get the word out about the importance of landscaping with native plants.

I wanted to mention that the perfect companion to Douglas Tallamy’s book is Native Plant of the Northeast: A Guide for Gardening & Conservation by Donald Leopold (Timber Press). In it, Dr. Leopold provides comprehensive lists of trees, shrubs, wildflowers, grasses, and ferns - including information describing each species attributes, soil and light requirements, and basic propagation requirements. Most plant descriptions are accompanied by beautiful color photos.

Also, folks willing to propagate wildflowers from seed can establish them cheaply by ordering seed packets (mostly \$3 to \$5 per packet) from a number of distributors. Here are several recommendations:

Everwilde Farm (<http://www.Everwilde.com>)

Pase Seeds (<http://www.paseseeds.com/servlet/the-Perennials/Categories>) located in North Collins (note that some native species are available among the many non-native species)

Prairie Frontier (<http://www.prairiefrontier.com>)

Prairie Moon (<http://www.prairiemoon.com>)

Toadshade Wildflower Farm (www.toadshade.com)

Vermont Wildflower Farm (<http://www.vermontwildflowerfarm.com>)

Dr. Leopold provides basic propagation information in his book. An excellent resource for detailed propagation info is Wildflowers: A Guide to Growing and Propagating Native Flowers of North America by William Cullina (New England Wild Flower Society).

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CHUCK ROSENBERG, ELMA, ON Sun Apr 8, 2012 at 11:48 AM