

Horticulture Diagnostic Laboratory



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
of Suffolk County
www.ccesuffolk.org

Extension Education Center
423 Griffing Ave, Ste 100
Riverhead, NY 11901-3071
631-727-4126

Bayard Cutting Arboretum
Montauk Hwy
Great River, NY 11739
631-581-4223



Ferns and Native Plants in the Natural Landscape for Long Island

Who can explain "The Back to Nature" movement, which is fast becoming a significant trend in landscaping and gardening in the USA?

There are many reasons. The most important is the awareness of the public concerning environmental issues. Every day articles appear in newspapers and TV newscasters are talking about acid rain, drought or floods, water restrictions and reservoir levels, clean air and pollution, chemical poisoning and restrictions, wetlands and conservation issues, health and physical fitness, and no smoking in public places campaigns. These issues and others are making all of us more aware of our surrounding environment.

For example, a significant surge in backyard home improvement came about as a result of the "gas-oil" crunch of the 70's. Forced to stay home, people became more aware of their surroundings and improved their properties for active and passive recreational uses. Swimming pools, terraces, specialty gardens, developed woodlands and vegetable gardens -- all became necessary and popular. The more affluent added tennis courts, gazebos, hot tubs, lean-to energy-saving greenhouses, and almost everyone wanted a wood stove.

Another example of environmental influence is restrictions on watering during drought; homeowners started thinking about less lawn and alternative ways to garden with reduced maintenance costs and less irrigation. The logical answer for many of these landscape requirements included the use of native plants. They, of course, have proved over centuries that some are tolerant of drought, shade, hot sun, wet low areas, steep slopes, competition, pestilence and neglect.

Let me isolate another significant influence that has encouraged people to think naturally. There is a strong movement underway in the U.S. called the National Wildflower Society, whose guiding influence is Lady Bird Johnson. Lest we forget her "Beautify America" campaign? Through the society's research and guidance, millions of dollars have and will be saved in maintenance costs on the nation's highways by developing right of ways and medians to wildflowers. The influence will be felt by every homeowner in America. The much reduced mowing costs can be measured in dollars but the effectiveness, beauty and enjoyment of miles of wildflowers will have a powerful influence on the nation's travelers.

If gardening is reputed to be the No. 1 leisure activity in America today, we better be ready for those people who definitely want this "natural look," woodland gardens, gardens that attract birds and wildlife, low-maintenance perennials, plantings that "care for themselves." Hopefully, the trend for "gaudy" landscaping is on the decline. All of us need to be reminded that simplicity and repetition is the key to success in landscaping. Who better than our creator reminds us of that when we see natural landscapes in this great country of ours.

About ten years ago we devoted a 1,000 sq. ft. area under some mature white pines to a woodland garden at Panfield Nurseries, Huntington. It simply consists of a stepping path, a bench and a small pond. The plant material is mostly native, consisting of ferns in variety and woodland perennials, combined with some shade perennials such as *Hosta* sp., *Liriope* sp., Bleeding Heart, *Astilbe* sp. and *Epimedium* sp. Native shrubs include Bayberry, Pink Shell *Azalea Vaseyi*, some naturally grown Andromeda, a specimen (unpruned) *Enkianthus*, and some bird attractors like *Aronia brilliantissima*, *Ilex verticillata*, *Clethra* sp., and a few viburnums. All of us are astounded by the growth and development of this "Quiet Place." Every year we wonder at the continual changes in growth and development of the "stands" of wildflowers and ferns, how they divide and multiply, or not, how they seasonally change and attract, the combinations with one another, the texture contrasts; the reaction of the

public to the popular choices. This garden has become our ten-month flower show for all to see, enjoy and learn from.

Some of these planting combinations I particularly would recommend are:

- Allegheny foam flower and Maidenhair fern -- a rough textured groundcover with a delicate lacy foliage of fern.
- Big leaf and variegated forms of *Hosta* with cinnamon fern. The bold dark green foliage and the light green delicate fronds.
- *Epidmedium* and Pink shell azaleas. The contrast of the light green groundcover and delicate flowers of an upright accent.
- *Liriope* and a stump. A bold dark green grass-like leaf and the character of a grotesque dead object.
- Mayapple and Royal ferns. A stand of light green elephant ear foliage and a tall regal delicate foliate.

The following is a list of some of my favorite ferns and perennials, ones which have continued to be successful, both in production and use in the landscape.

- Cinnamon fern - (*Osmunda cinnamomea*) Fabulous changes in stages of development from fiddle head to cinnamon stick. Wonderful for naturalizing large areas, in light shade or shade.
- Royal fern - (*Osmunda regalis*) Different - not invasive -combines well in a border.
- Maidenhair fern - (*Adiantum pedatum*) Delicate -- looks well with rough textures, stone walls, etc.
- Christmas fern - (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) Tolerates almost any conditions, evergreen.
- Polypody rock fern - (*Polypodium vulgare*) Low - unusual – need not grow out of or on top of a rock.
- American columbine - (*Aquilegia canadensis*) Seeds itself – long blooming period.
- Bloodroot - (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) Early bloomer. Best white. Good groundcover foliage.
- Jack In The Pulpit - (*Arisaema* sp.) Interesting. Wet spots.
- Yellow & Snow trillium -- (*Trillium luteum*, *T. grandiflora*) Naturalize groundcovers.
- Virginia Bluebells -- (*Mertensia virginica*) Under plantings for rhododendron. Long blooming, seeds itself.
- Marsh Marigold - (*Caltha palustris*) Early flowering, wet areas.
- Crested Iris - (*Iris cristata*) Amongst rocks and near water, ponds, etc.
- Blueflag Iris - (*Iris versicolor*) Near rocks, dependable.
- Wild Geranium - (*Geranium maculatum*) Seeds itself, long blooming.
- Mayapple - (*Podophyllum peltatum*) Establishes a stand, unusual.
- Shooting Star - (*Dodecatheon meadia*) White form available.
- Allegheny Foam Flower - (*Tiarella cordifolia*) Good groundcover, moist and wet areas.
- Cardinal Flower - (*Lobelia cardinalis*) Near ponds and wet areas.
- Partridgeberry - (*Mitchella repens*) Evergreen, low groundcover.
- Fringed Bleeding Heart - (*Dicentra exima*) My favorite perennial. Amongst shade wildflowers and ferns. Blooms April to November.

Also I suggest these native trees and shrubs:

- Witchhazel - (*Hamamelis virginiana*) Blooms yellow in late autumn. Clump form tree especially interesting, like clump birch.
- Bayberry - (*Myrica pensylvanica*) Sun or light shade. Seaside hardy. Glossy leaves in the shade - deciduous – always dependable.
- Spice Bush - (*Clethra alnifolia*) Blooms late summer. Spicy smell. Lovely, striking yellow fall color. Tolerates wet areas or dry.
- Shadblow - (*Amelanchier* sp.) Early white flower, contrasting grey bark in winter.

These natives are not only planted for admiration. They solve many landscape problem situations such as shade, drainage (wet or dry areas), large open areas, erosion control and basic groundcover. Examples would be: Christmas fern for shade; Marsh marigold for wet areas; Bluets for open areas; Hayscented ferns for erosion control; and Winterberry for groundcover.

Don't be skimpy when planting ferns and native perennials. I would recommend nothing less than 24 ferns planted 2' on center to establish a good looking stand; at least a dozen of any wildflower groups and think in terms of sixes when adding shade perennials. Use them generously, the rewards will be remarkable.

Some years ago I designed and constructed a woodland garden for a lady client whose husband had no interest in it whatsoever. He commuted by helicopter to New York City and lived in a fast pace banking-financier's life. Unfortunately, a heart attack slowed him down requiring a six-month recovery at home. Guess where he walked everyday? Not only did he regain strength physically, but I was told that the garden became a new outlet for him to enjoy and relax. It also aroused his curiosity about plants. What better way to curb stress in your life and find a relaxing, fascinating passion than to enjoy the world of native plants.

If you haven't experienced the natives, I encourage you to do so. I think you will find places for them everyday in recommending and solving landscape situations. I suggest a "quiet place" in that shady area in the backyard, a meandering path through the wooded area, a small fiberglass pond near the edge of the lawn; you will get no resistance from anyone.

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The author Thomas F. Paterson was affiliated with Panfield Nurseries located on Long Island in Huntington, NY.

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