

Cullen: Let's all go 'native'

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"Let nature be your teacher"

— William Wordsworth

As current trends in gardening go, the planting of native species is second only to that of growing food, as I see it.

This makes sense for a variety of reasons.

Native plants are generally low maintenance:

by definition they are tolerant of drought

conditions and generally free of insect and disease problems. They managed to survive nicely on their own for generations before the Europeans arrived here, after all.

They also attract a wide range of native pollinators like honey bees, hummingbirds and butterflies. The preservation of native plant species has value as well. The more native plants that we plant in our gardens, the more we help to protect and preserve them for future generations.

The invasive plants that have caused such a stir in recent years are not native plants. Go figure. Some, like the Norway maple and the English ivy, are named after places far away. Altogether, the invasive species that are listed by the Ontario Invasive Plant Council are referred to as "Eurasian." This is another way of saying that they are not native to Canada. More at www.invadingspecies.com.

If you have an interest in learning more, I urge you to contact the Ontario Chapter of North American Native Plant Society at www.nanps.org. This is a volunteer-driven, active group with a lot to offer. As their brochure states, they "promote the study, conservation, cultivation and restoration of native flora."

Coming up Saturday, May 7, is their annual native plant sale, where hundreds of plants will be available to the public. Many of these plants are hard to find or rare, native species. The location is the Markham Civic Centre (corner of Highway 7 and Warden Ave.) from 10 a.m. 3 p.m.

Also featured on that day are lectures on "Making It Work: How to a Create Pollinator Habitat in Your City" with Vicki Beard at 11 a.m., and "Invasive Garden Plants" with Colleen Cirillo at noon. Both seminars are free.



MARK CULLEN PHOTO

Black-eyed Susans are one of the great native plants. It elf propagates and is a long late summer bloomer.

The Society also provides a native plant seed exchange, a quarterly 12-page newsletter, year-round educational seminars, tear sheets, and an interactive message board. Not bad for \$20 a year.

If you are anxious to just wade into the wilderness of your favourite garden retailer to look for native plants, I can recommend some based on my experience.

I emphasize the need to match your growing conditions to the plant. Do not, in other words, plant trilliums in your garden just because you love them. Without damp soil in early spring that is rich in leaf mould and located under the cover of deciduous trees, your trilliums will waste away. And that is a shame for both you and the plants.

Native Perennials for sun

- Bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*): Long flowering period mid-summer.
- Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*): Self propagates, long late-summer bloomer.
- False sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*): Tall, background plant.
- Giant hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*): Easy to grow, reliable perennial, attracts lots of bees.
- New England aster (*Symphotricum novae-angliae*): Great fall colour.

Native Perennials for Shade

- Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*): Enjoys full shade, early spring performer.
- Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*): Great groundcover.
- Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos Uva-Ursi*): Attractive berries

Native Vines

- Virgin's Bower (*Clematis virginiana*): Great flowers in full sun.
- Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*): Aggressive, shade tolerant.

Flowering Shrubs

- Canada buffaloberry (*Shepherdia canadensis*): Fast growing.
- Highbush cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*): Fruit attractive to birds in winter.
- Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*): Fast growing, great screen.
- Serviceberry (*Amelanchier laevis*): Grows tree-like in several years. Early spring bloomer.
- Staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*): Aggressive, helps stop soil erosion on a slope.

Trees

- Bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*): Tall, slow growing, narrow.
- Red oak (*Quercus rubra*): A “granddaddy” of a tree, needs space.
- Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*): Light, airy feel due to finely textured leaves.
- Red maple (*Acer rubrum*): Not tolerant of pollution but great fall colour.
- White birch (*Betula papyrifera*): Less susceptible to birch borer, grows fast.
- White pine (*Pinus strobus*): Not a great city tree as it grows “thin,” however a great long-term screen elsewhere.

Birds and Beans

Speaking of indigenous, our songbirds deserve some attention as well. As a passionate coffee drinker I noticed while shopping recently that there is a line of coffee beans available at some local retailers with the label “Birds and Beans” on it. At first glance it is not obvious what it is all about, but a short conversation with David Pritchard and Madeleine Pengelley from Birds and Beans while visiting the Ontario Organic Conference filled me in.

Turns out that most coffee is grown in the open where migratory birds do not benefit from the cover of shaded crops. Bird-friendly coffee is grown in rustic shade that is similar to a rainforest and provides habitat to migratory songbirds. According to Pritchard and Pengelley, they get inspiration from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, which defines criteria for shade as it relates to bird habitat. Based on the findings of several experts in the field, “the most important thing that we can do as coffee drinkers is to help migratory songbirds by buying certified shade grown coffee.”

Finally, they say that winter habitat south of here is the biggest problem for songbirds: not their summer homes up here. In a backwards kind of way I find it refreshing to learn that the problems of declining songbird populations does not start with us in the north. The least that we can do is to buy coffee that supports their winter habitat.

By the way, Birds and Beans coffee is by its nature organic. Farmers are not spraying pesticide on these trees if birds are expected to live amongst them.

You can learn more at www.birdsandbeans.ca. Or visit their shop at 2413 Lake Shore Blvd. W., east of Mimico Ave., 416-913-9221. Currently, they are putting in a bird-friendly outdoor patio that will be worth checking out.

Garden Guide

I noticed recently that Sheridan Nurseries has published this year’s annual *Garden Guide*. They have expanded it to over 170 pages and added more pages on “tips for planting,” including how to garden and be environmentally responsible, growing vegetables, planting and maintaining your garden, pruning basics, plus the usually thorough listing of plants by common name by category, with the proper botanical name. Cultural information including growing zones, preferred exposure, ultimate height and various plant uses are all listed.

It is a very useful tool for the experienced gardener and the novice. I frequently use it as a reference tool. A bargain for \$4.95 at any Sheridan location. Visit www.sheridannurseries.com for more details.

Question of the Week

Q: We have a forsythia in full bloom and we are wondering if it's too late to cut it back. It needs to be cut back quite a bit.

A: It's not too late but if you wait another two weeks you will have enjoyed the blooms to their fullest. You've waited all year for the blooms, now enjoy them! You can prune forsythia almost as aggressively as you wish. Don't just prune it for shape. Get into the middle of the shrub and remove some of the heavy wood to open it up and allow the sunshine into the plant. This encourages new growth and future blooms.

*Mark Cullen is an expert gardener, author and broadcaster. You can sign up for his free monthly newsletter at www.markcullen.com, and watch him on CTV Canada AM every Wednesday at 8:45 a.m. You can reach Mark through the "contact" button on his website. Mark's latest book, *The Canadian Garden Primer*, is available at Home Hardware and all major bookstores.*