

Caring For Our Common Home:

Going Natural

..... *Julie Sherlock Fishman*

Plants and animals have evolved together regionally, so much so that many species' survival relies on the existence of others. As the Americas were colonized, a multitude of plants from other continents were introduced that have out-competed native plants. Because the local insects are not adapted to these foreign plants, they have trouble eating them and thus avoid them. As non-native plants take over, native insects have less to eat and their populations are declining. Insects are crucial for pollination, aerating the soil, controlling pests, decomposing dead animals, and providing the food base for other animal life. Caterpillars, in particular, are essential to many bird species. Regardless of what songbirds eat as adults, their nestlings are mainly fed caterpillars. Birds too, are an important part of our ecosystem. We can help increase the occurrence of caterpillars by planting their native host plants and, in turn, help increase bird populations. Likewise, more of these plants means more nectar, pollen and seeds for insects, birds, small mammals and other wildlife.

You can help by encouraging and planting natives and removing invasive non-native plants. Start by learning how to identify wild plants and which ones are native or non-native and invasive (a few native plants can be invasive too). Chose what is native to Central New York and think about what species will fit in your situation. Sun and shade-tolerance should be considered as should placing plants near compatible ones. There are plants that are better suited for wet soils than well-drained areas. Acidic or alkaline soils may play a role as well. Focus should be on the more ecologically productive types (hosting multiple species of insects) such as native oaks, maples, cherries, viburnums, milkweeds, goldenrods, and asters. (See list on back of this page for an easy starter list). Plants should never be taken from public places and many species are protected by law (https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/2019rareplantlists.pdf). It's best to go to a native plant nursery or a native plant sale and ask questions. Beware of "Nativars" or native cultivars; they do not hold the same genetic integrity needed to maintain the required relationship with insects. They usually have an extra flashy name written after the Genus and species name, sometimes with "var." for variety. Watch out for mimics too! Those pretty Black-eyed-Susans at the farmers market are most often a Japanese variety, not the native *Rudbeckia hirta*. Attend local native plant presentations and seminars. (*Habitat Gardening of Central New York* is the local chapter of the non-profit group Wild Ones which promotes native plants). Places such as Baltimore Woods Nature Center , the NYSDEC and Onondaga County Soil & Water Conservation District have annual plant sales which often include natives. Propagation of wild plants can be tricky. Approach it as experimental and be patient – this isn't as easy as planting a pack of perennials from a big box garden center or getting a packet of tried-and-true seeds from a hardware store. Once established though, native plant gardens are low-maintenance, need little watering and are a great source of peace and beauty!

Some information on what species are native to Central New York and where to get them:
https://files.constantcontact.com/b745f9ba001/2f289baf-9d50-450e-8823-0cf43ffcf826.pdf
https://www.audubon.org/native-plants
https://www.audubon.org/PLANTSFORBIRDS
https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/factnatives.pdf
http://www.plantnative.org/rpl-nypanj.htm
https://content.yardmap.org/learn/removing-lawn-to-make-way-for-more-habitat/

Recommended Books: *Bringing Nature Home, How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* and *Nature's Best Hope, A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Backyard* by Doug Tallamy
Native Plants of the Northeast, A Guide for Gardening and Conservation by Don Leopold

Butterfly Book, The Complete Guide to Butterfly Gardening, Identification and Behavior by Donald and Lillian Stokes and Ernest Williams
A Field Guide to Wildflowers by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny
Newcomb's Wildflower Guide by Lawrence Newcomb and Gordon Morrison

Dealing with Invaders: There are volumes of information found on the internet on invasive species control. Start with your local Cooperative Extension and USDA. Try to narrow down your search to the species you want to get rid of such as Common Buckthorn, Japanese Honeysuckle, or Burning Bush. Many invasive plants are extremely difficult to control especially when they can spread by numerous seeds, extensive roots, runners and root suckers, or are able to grow from cuttings. Therefore, special and long-term efforts will need to be made.

Starter Native Plants for Central New York

Species Light Soil Features

Red Maple (Acer rubrum) - full to partial sun dry to wet grow up to 70 feet; vibrant orange to red fall colors

Cutleaf Coneflower (Rudbeckia laciniata)- Sun to partial shade moist

Species	Light	Soil	Features
Red Maple *Acer rubrum*	Full to Partial sun	Dry to Wet	grow up to 70 feet,vibrant orange to red fall colors, larval host to Rosy Maple Moth and Cecropia Moth
Red Chokeberry *Aronia arbutifolia*	Sun to partial sun	Dry to moist	Up to 8 feet tall, 4 feet wide,green leaves turn red orange and pruple in fall, bright red berries in the fall, berries for birds,
Red Osier Dogwood *Cornus sericea*	Sun to partial sun	Moist to wet	Can reach 9 feet , red stems, green leaves turn shades of purple and red in fall., berries important food source for late migrant and local birds.
New England Aster *Aster novae-angliae*	Sun to partial shade	moist	2-5 feet tall, bright purple flowers with yellow center, late summer into fall, great late season nectar source, butterfly larva host
Common Milkweed *Asclepias syriaca*	Full sun	Well-drained	4-6 feet tall, host plant for Monarch butterfly, nectar source for many insects, seeds dispersed in fall, can become invasive.
Cutleaf Coneflower *Rudbeckia laciniata*	Sun to partial shade	Moist	3-6 feet tall. Easy from seed in spring or division in fall, late season nectar source
Oswego Tea *Monarda didyma*	Partial sun to partial shade	Moist	3 -4 feet tall, grow easily from seed, brilliant red blooms mid-summer and spicy fragrance, nectar source for hummingbirds and butterflies
Blazing Star *Liatris spicata*	Sun to partial sun	Moist to wet	2-4 feet tall, Purple spike of flowers, , Nectar for butterflies, seeds for birds in late summer and fall

Autumn considerations – **use leaf litter** as winter mulch . Leaf litter in vital habitat for many insects, spiders, toads, , salamanders, birds and small mammals. It retains moisture and replenishes carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus into the soil. Many moths and butterflies over winter in leaf litter. Leaf blowers are destructive to what lives there.