

View of Sustainable Gardening:

LANDSCAPING FOR BIODIVERSITY

By Sean James

Having grown up near Crawford Lake in Campbellville, being “eco-friendly” is pretty much in my blood. This column will share ideas about sustainable gardening, which isn’t so much a style of gardening as it is a series of philosophies. In fact, it can be applied to any type of gardening from veggie gardens to English cottage gardens and even formal gardens.

One of the most important considerations is biodiversity, which works well since this is the United Nations’ Decade of Biodiversity. Biodiversity means having as many different, native life forms in an area as possible. One could also call it “creature variety.” The reason to care about this is that we humans need a large variety of species to ensure our own survival. To choose the obvious example, 30 per cent of our food must be pollinated, so we need bees, butterflies, and a few species of birds...oh, and many beetles and flies. From a landscaping point of view, this involves choosing plants which bloom from early spring, for pollinating fruit trees, to late fall, to help the bees and such make it through the winter. Many of these creatures are also excellent predators, feasting on garden pests.

Good biodiversity also means that pests in the garden won’t get out of control. I love listening to radio gardening shows and the callers asking about how to control slugs. I, personally, can’t seem to stop buying hostas since they’re just so cool and yet I never have slug problems. Even before I knew about biodiversity, I landscaped to attract birds to the garden...just because I like them. As it turns out, the birds eat the slugs. I also leave my garden standing through the winter instead of cleaning it up in the fall. Not only does this give the birds a reason to come but also provides shelter for beneficial insects like the voracious ground beetles, ladybugs and preying mantids. I really made a lucky decision with one choice. Looking for



A female Baltimore Oriole feeds on leaf beetles. Planting to draw in birds ensures many pests will be eaten...and you get to enjoy the birds too! PHOTO BY SEAN JAMES.

a short-term screen, I planted a large shrub willow. The willow gets fed on by willow leaf beetles. The leaf beetle gets fed on by birds. Again, this means that the birds are always there to feed on the other pests.

Even aphids have a place in the garden. Planting Lupins, which attract aphids, throughout the garden ensures a steady population of ladybugs so that when other plants get aphids, the predators are already there to stop them from getting out of control.

The corollary to having many species is that having a garden planted with many *specimens* of a few species means that you’re planting a buffet for the pests that feed on them. This can also be a province-wide problem. Many of us plant the same plants as our neighbours do: Euonymus, junipers, daylilies, Magnolias, and most noteworthy...ash, which means that pests or diseases will sweep through a community and kill all the specimens. Planting too much of the latest “fad plant” only ensures that some monster problem will raise its ugly head in a big and devastating way.

Plant for variety. Plant to attract different types of wildlife. Don’t aim to totally eliminate all pests since they are food for predators. The truth is, there’s more to cover than can be learned in a lifetime, or one article, and there are always more new ideas, and old ones, being brought to light every day. Don’t be scared. Don’t be daunted. Just take baby steps. Learn a bit at a time. Experiment with it. Tweak it. Learn the next thing. **ev**

Sean James is the owner of Fern Ridge Landscaping and Eco-consulting and is the Chair of Landscape Ontario’s Environmental Stewardship Committee. He’s also a past president of the Milton Horticultural Society and sits on the Perennial Plant Association’s Environmental Committee. If you have questions or comments, email him through editor@EscarpmentViews.ca or reach him through www.fernidgelandscaping.com/forum.

Sean’s Favourite Plants for Biodiversity

Trees:

Red Oak – *Quercus rubra* (500 species of insects feed on it)

Blue Ash – *Fraxinus quadrangulata* (resistant to the borer and it will fill the niche left when the other species of ash die...and it’s really, really nice!)

Shrubs:

Grey Dogwood – *Cornus racemosa* (Multiple seasons of interest including great fall colour and food for many types of wildlife)

Any Willows – *Salix sp.* (Many are lovely and their pests are a feast for the birds)

Viburnums other than *V. trilobum* (very ornamental and flowers for pollinators and berries for birds)

Eastern Redbud – *Cercis canadensis* (early flower for spring pollinators plus great fall colour)

Flowering Raspberry – *Rubus odoratus* (great for dense, dry shade with multiple seasons of interest and appealing to many species of wildlife)

Perennials:

Native Grasses (a different, necessary texture and great for winter interest, shelter and food for birds)

Coneflower species – *Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* (wonderful for butterflies and other pollinators and lovely for late season flowers and winter interest)

Crocus and Heath – *Erica sp* (not native, but very early spring flowers for pollinators)