

Segment for Week of June 1, 2020

Native Plants

This is Julie Callahan bringing you information on shore friendly living and gardening from the Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension. This week I will be talking to you about native plants and their benefits to wildlife and our landscapes.

Native plants evolved and spread without human involvement in response to the unique characteristics of a region: the climate, soils, timing of rainfall, drought, and frost. Their evolution was also influenced by other local species with which they formed complex and interdependent relationships. By providing food and shelter specially adapted to meet the needs of native animal species, native plants provide a practical and ecologically valuable alternative for landscaping.

Native plants offer many advantages to the home gardener. Although maybe not as showy as a non-native or exotic variety, native plants have many desirable attributes and can be beautifully woven into the tapestry of a landscape. As mentioned above, one of their most valuable benefits is that they support native wildlife. Because of this, they attract a greater variety of birds and butterflies to the garden where they can find protection from the elements and from predators. And they provide the nutrition needed for a bird or butterfly to thrive, not just to get his stomach full!

Native plants require less water, fertilizer and pesticide, thus adding fewer chemicals to the landscape and maintaining water quality in nearby streams and rivers. Since well adapted to their surroundings, these plants require very little

maintenance, and, once established, often surpass non- natives in ruggedness and resistance to drought, insects and disease.

Non-native plants that give back less and require more increase the risk of the more desirable natives being overtaken. These non-native plants, while many times beautiful and appear to feed the wildlife, cannot sustain a healthy ecosystem. It's important to plant a diverse vegetative layer, starting with trees that provide a high overhead canopy down to the lowly groundcover plant. The mid-layer, or "understory," is critical to supporting a wide range of wildlife by providing cover, nectar sources for insects, nuts and berries for birds and mammals, and places to raise young. An expansive lawn bordered by tall trees offers no places for birds and mammals to eat and live. The lawn may see a few robins and starlings but not thrashers, towhees or wood thrushes. A toad might hide underneath a porch but not the salamanders or frogs who enjoy groundcovers and water sources.

In recent years, there has been much interest and research focused on native plants and their influence on healthy functioning ecosystems. Consequently, there are many publications which provide guidance on planting native plants. One of the best sources is the "Virginia Eastern Shore Plant Guide," available online for download or as hardcopy from [Virginia Native Plant Society](#). Also a search on Virginia Native Plants will yield many sources of information including publications from the [VA Department of Conservation and Recreation](#) and the [Department of Game and Inland Fisheries](#). The Virginia Cooperative Extension also offers many [publications](#) to help the home gardener better understand wise landscape design and maintenance.

From my home in Chincoteague, I recorded **xx** inches of rain this past week.

For answers to Gardening questions call your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office.