**Gardening for Nature, Part 1**

**Segment for Week of Feb 7, 2022**

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 talk about gardening with nature.

When we garden with nature, we surround ourselves with a diverse, healthy plant community that provides multiple ecological services. A crucial function of a plant community is the support it gives to wildlife, providing organic matter, food, and cover for a variety of organisms. Biologically diverse communities of plants and animals, when combined with surrounding elements of soil, water, and sunlight, form a continuous energy exchange called an ecosystem. And the home gardener can create a mini ecosystem through thoughtful planning and nature’s inspiration.

If we want to create a healthy plant community in the home landscape, we simply need to “put back” many of the plants and other elements that would naturally have occurred there and arrange them in a way to support wildlife. A healthy plant community is comprised of natural layers. As observed in the wild, we begin with the bottom mulch layer, critical for the support of many insects who break down leaf litter and provide food for other animals. Therefore, the first step in establishing a healthy ecosystem in the garden is to maintain a mulch layer.

On top of the mulch, is a layer of groundcover comprised of a diversity of plants in varying heights which provide a protective covering for the soil below. This is in contrast to a carpet of a single plant and height, such as a mowed lawn.

Above the groundcover is the shrub layer comprised of flowering shrubs that grow in a wide range of sizes from a 2’ high low bush blueberry to a 20’ high rhododendron. Overhead is found the tree layer, comprised of understory trees such as the redbud, and, above it all, is the overhead canopy provided by the tallest trees such as oaks, pines, and birches.

A diverse layered plant community is the key to a successful garden ecosystem but is not alone in contributing to the health and beauty of your landscape.

Consider incorporating a cluster of stones to provide a place for wildlife to seek shelter. They afford cool dark areas to rest and provide valuable hiding spots from predators. Arrange them unevenly, with spaces in between and, like in nature, establish groundcover around the edges or a vine that will grow over them. If space permits, also consider adding a brush pile to provide some of the same benefits.

Water is an essential element and can be provided in many ways. Consider creating a backyard pond surrounded by natural stones, shells, and water-loving plants. A bird bath, placed close to a shrub or tree for quick cover, is an easy water feature. Or divert a shallow depression where rainwater naturally collects into a mini-wetland.

Next week, we will continue the discussion on creating a natural garden.

For more information or for answers to your questions, contact your local Accomack or Northampton County Extension Office. You can also follow the Eastern Shore Master Gardeners on Facebook.