**Native Plants are the Best, Part 1**

**Segment for Week of Nov. 9, 2020**

This is Steve Ruleson bringing you information on shore friendly living and gardening from the Master Gardeners and Virginia Cooperative Extension. This week the first of a two-part series on native plants and their benefit to our gardens and to the environment we live in.

Native plants evolved and spread without human intervention throughout their range 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 species inhabiting the local community with which they formed complex and interdependent relationships. They form the basic component of the living landscape and provide food and shelter specifically adapted to meet the needs of native animal species. Thus, native plants provide a practical and ecologically valuable alternative for landscaping.

Native plants offer many advantages to the home gardener. Although sometimes not as showy as a cultivated, non-native or exotic varieties, native plants have many desirable attributes and are a beneficial addition to the landscape tapestry. As mentioned above, one of their most valuable benefits is that they support native wildlife, performing as “host plants” that provide for all stages of an animal’s lifecycle including mating and nesting sites and food sources. Because of this, they attract a greater variety of birds and butterflies to the garden. They provide a natural habitat where these animals 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 its stomach full!

Because they are adapted to the native environment, these 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.

The knowledgeable gardener understands that planting non-natives increases the risk of the more desirable natives being overtaken by plants that give back less and require more. These non-native plants, while many times beautiful and appear to feed the wildlife, cannot sustain a healthy ecosystem. This gardener also knows that it is important to plant a diversity of vegetative layers (go for 3 dimensional effect by adding depth), starting with trees that provide a high overhead canopy down to the lowly groundcover plant. The mid-layer, or “understory,” is the most critical to supporting wildlife by providing cover from weather and predators, nectar sources for insects, nuts and berries for birds and mammals, and places to raise young (birds prefer the shrub layer for their nests).

Next week I will continue this topic by giving you information on natives of the Coastal Plain region. From my perch near the mouth of Occohannock Creek, I recorded xxx of rain last week.

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