Gardening With Nature

By Teresa Gallion
Special to News Post

Through history, gardeners have been conquering nature. They prove their abilities to grow what they want where they want it. There is a different approach, working with nature. Gardeners are finding an appreciation for the ability to create, restore or preserve natural places.

Starting from the bottom, use the soil that's already in your yard for plants you want to include in your garden. Get your soil tested. Find out the pH and what nutrients are present. What kind of soil do you have: sandy, loam or clay? Once you know the natural state of your soil, use it to your advantage and plant what will be happy there. A little research will save you from trying to put an azalea in soil that isn't acid enough to support its good health. How much water is naturally available in your garden? Pond- or stream-side plantings should be plants that like to be wet or their roots may rot. Note how much rain falls in your area, and how your garden area drains. Work with the natural drainage and plant a rain garden to make the best use of free water coming out of the sky. When rain is scarce, like this summer, you'll want to have plants that can survive the tough times. Did you know the prickly-pear cactus is native to this area?

Before you plant, watch the sun exposure of the site. Many flowers need full sun. That means at least 6 hours a day of direct sunshine. Ferns and many other plants prefer the shade. Weather and climate are very important to the gardener. The USDA has established zones that indicate the ability of plants to survive throughout the US. A tropical plumeria will thrive in a warm climate like Hawaii, but here in Maryland, you'll need to move it indoors every autumn. Choose plants that belong in your location naturally and you can forget those zone maps.

Nature provides fauna along with the flora of the garden. Insects are needed to pollinate flowers in order to make fruits and seeds, so use the principles of integrated pest management and don't reach for a pesticide when you see a bug. The garden planted with nature in mind will provide food for the bees and the birds. You're also bound to have some animals such as squirrels that want to dig up what you've painstakingly planted. Prepare for natures re-planters and don't be broken-hearted when it happens. Be prepared for your plants to be chewed. You can discourage deer by planting milkweed, but monarch butterfly caterpillars will eat it up. Plant more and be ready to share.

Consider what you are planting in your garden. The plants that will naturally thrive in your local soil, with available water and sun, survive the climate extremes and animal use will be plants that have always grown here. Native plants are generally considered to be those that have not been moved around by people. Sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? Select plants that will be supported in the location instead of working against nature and you'll be rewarded with a view of wildlife in your own backyard.

EQUAL ACCESS PROGRAMS
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

When you look at plant names, think about what they are telling you. Proper plant names are Latin, but you don't have to be a Latin scholar to know that plants that include "japonica" were named for their Japanese roots. Common names say a lot, as well: Norway maple trees are not native to Maryland, USA.

To be sure you're selecting natives, check the website of the Maryland Native Plant Society www.mdflora.org

Teresa Gallion Master Gardener, Board of Directors WildOnes, NWF Habitat Steward, Wildlife Gardening Adventures

Helpful Links: www.for-wild.org WildOnes

www.nwf.org National Wildlife Federation

http://www.hgic.umd.edu/ UMD Home and Garden Info ctr.

http://www.nps.gov/plants/pubs/chesapeake/ Native Plants List

www.gardeningadventures.com Local Consultant

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301-600-1596, or visit http://Frederick.umd.edu. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.