

Why Grow Natives?

BY CINNY MACGONAGLE '07

Randi Eckel from Toadshade Wildflower Farm gave a fascinating talk to members of the new Hunterdon Chapter of the Native Plant Society of NJ on November 18th. Her topic was Landscaping with a Purpose: What's Diversity Got to Do with It? What do we gain by increasing diversity in our gardens, fields and forests?

Randi suggested that the diversity of our native plants can be used to create outstanding gardens. There are 2,200 plant species native to New Jersey and there is a plant for every situation. Native plants are adapted to our environment and will survive our poor soils, hot, dry summers and harsh winters.

When you find caterpillars on your native plants, don't be alarmed...

Our native plants support a vast array of fauna. When you find caterpillars on your native plants, don't be alarmed – be happy that you are providing a host for one of New Jersey's 115 native butterflies or 800 moths.

You'll be providing for their life cycle, and, not to worry, they will not devour the entire plant! In fact, many caterpillars will quickly disappear, since insects are a necessary food source for our songbirds, particularly in spring when parents feed their young this much-needed protein. What plants you choose to put in your garden will often define the food choices of our wildlife.

Our gardens may also provide habitat for many creatures. Planting layers of trees, shrubs, perennials and groundcovers will offer needed shelter for birds to hide from predators and seek shelter from inclement weather. Randi urged gardeners to leave leaf litter as mulch and habitat for overwintering pupae. Planting for seasonal bloom times will provide needed nectar for our pollinators, including the 400 species of bees that are native to New Jersey. When we create diversity in our gardens we might consider not only the requirements of the plants, their bloom time and structure, but the habitat they offer wildlife as well.

The next meeting of the Hunterdon Chapter of the Native Plant Society of NJ, will be on January 19th. at 7:00 at the Hunterdon County Arboretum. There is no charge for attending meetings, and anyone who has an interest in native plants is invited.

To be added to the contact list, email Cinnie MacGonagle at cmacgonagle@yahoo.com.

Among Randi's plant recommendations are favorites of butterflies, pollinators and/or hummingbirds:



Baptisia australis
Blue false Indigo



Antennaria plantaginifolia
Plantain leaf Pussytoes



Solidago caesia
Wreath Goldenrod



Penstemon calycosus
Calico Beardtongue



Asclepias tuberosa
Butterfly Milkweed



Iris versicolor
Northern Blue Flag Iris



Sambucus nigra
Black Elderberry



Eutrochium fistulosum
Hollow Joe Pye Weed