

Lessons Learned From Creating A Native Garden “Re-Discovering MY Native Garden”

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Failure may be the best teacher...I have learned much.

Gardening offers me a satisfying, creative, and artistic opportunity. But, once created, I prefer spending time *enjoying* my garden rather than laboring in it.

Educational Tours:

- “Splash” garden tour organized by Chalily Pond and Garden (www.chalily.com) at the end of September.
- ***“Pond-O-Rama” pond tour organized by the Saint Louis Water Garden Society (<https://slwgs.org>) in early June.
- “St. Louis Native Plant Garden Tour” organized by the St. Louis Audubon Society (<https://stlouisaudubon.org>) and Wild Ones, St. Louis Chapter (<https://stlwildones.org>) in June.
- ***“St. Louis Open Yards Program” (<https://stlopenyards.com>) schedules personal tours with the owner of select private native gardens throughout the St. Louis region from May through October.

***My garden is available to view on these tours.

Information:

- St. Louis Wild Ones: <https://stlwildones.org/>. Webinars: <https://www.youtube.com/c/WildOnesNativePlants/playlists>.
- Grow Native: <https://grownative.org/>. Has excellent 1) native plant guide and 2) native landscape care calendar-how we need to change our landscape habits to help wildlife and habitat.
- Missouri Botanical Gardens:
 - Natives: <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/visual-guides/natives-for-home-gardens>.
 - “Plants Of Merit”: <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/plants-of-merit>.
 - Master Gardener program: <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/gardening-in-st.-louis/master-gardeners>.
 - They also have courses on individual subjects. I particularly enjoyed the landscape design class and Bokashi recycling class.
- Missouri Prairie Foundation: <https://moprairie.org/>
- St. Louis Community College: <https://stlcc.edu/programs-academics/continuing-education/>.
- Missouri Wildflowers Nursery: Excellent free catalogue, https://mowildflowers-net.3dcartstores.com/Request-a-Catalog_ep_46.html.

Plant Labels:

- St. Louis Wild Ones (<https://stlwildones.org/plant-tags/>) currently (2022) sells 50 different native plant pre-printed ID labels at native plant sale events. Additional labels produced regularly. \$3 each including posts.
- Twin Cities Wild Ones (<http://www.wildonestwincities.org/p/w.html>) offers a wider variety of similar plant ID signs. \$3 each including posts.

Lessons Learned:

1. Why native plants?

- Hardy and low maintenance (helps make ALL your landscape low maintenance): less work and more time to enjoy your garden

- ONCE ESTABLISHED has minimal need for added water and nutrients (and less weeding)
 - Limited plant pallet makes choices much easier
 - Can be evergreen and long blooming
 - They work well with NON-native plants
 - Brings birds, bees, butterflies, and wildlife back into your garden
2. What is a native? Experts vary in definition.
 - A plant which is 'native' and naturally occurring in your 'area' (not imported from elsewhere).
 - Preferably a plant grown from local, wild seed. The same species may grow naturally in other parts of the USA but genetically will not be as well adapted to our habitat.
 - Native cultivars ("nativars") MAY work well as natives...see how they thrive in your habitat and interact with the wildlife.
 - Native plants should support native wildlife.
 3. In my opinion, there is no definition of a 'native garden' you have to embrace except giving natives a priority in your garden. It can grow and evolve over time to meet YOUR needs and preferences. Native gardening is an APPROACH to gardening, not a STYLE of garden.
 4. Natives for all options: containers, balconies, patios, small yards, open spaces, shade, sun, wet, and dry locations.
 5. Consider your garden as your 'outside living space': outside rooms, views in all four seasons, and flow between inside and outside.
 6. Plan in **FOUR** dimensions:
 - Think vertical (walls, fences, and trellises) to surround yourself with color and interest.
 - Think time: i) overlapping bloom times for continuous color, ii) spring 'ephemerals' and bulbs for early color, iii) late blooming plants and colorful autumn foliage for late season interest, and iv) evergreens, seedheads, dramatic bare limbs, and interesting bark for winter interest.
 7. Work and enjoy your garden in all 4 seasons.
 - The garden is a good excuse to enjoy the outdoors in ALL season. There is always work to be done.
 - Colorful pots (self draining/self watering) add winter color to the garden and can be used for seasonal displays.
 - Hidden sculptures, rocks, etc to uncover as foliage dies back.
 - Heaters and fire-it's warm the winter chill . Umbrellas shade the hot days.
 8. Embrace failure, change, and serendipity. No decision is final. Every choice is either a success or an opportunity to learn.
 9. Patience and persistence. Natives "sleep, creep, and leap" during the first 3 years (Sue Leahy).
 10. "Preparation is 90% of the work." The basic principles of landscape design apply to every well designed garden (a community college or Botanical Gardens landscape course can save time, money, and disappointment). Create a careful plan, break the plan into small projects, research plant choices, install the hardscape, define the beds, and lastly install the plants.
 11. Install your own plants. Use a 6" augur with powerful hand drill to speed planting. You will ensure the right plant is planted correctly in the right location.
 12. Embrace ground covers:
 - Nature abhors a vacuum-don't leave open spaces.
 - Use a 'green mulch' of ground cover plants to lessen weeds as main plants mature.
 - Use leaf mulch and compost to enrich soil and protect young plants while allowing soil access for wildlife (bark mulch may be too dense for small critters).
 - Using one ground cover can tie separate beds together into a visual whole.
 13. Minimize maintenance: mowing strip (a flat brick area at grass level backed by a vertical brick), industrial vinegar (to kill weeds without chemical residue), irrigation + emitters for

stable watering, Mayne (<https://gomayne.com/>) rain barrel, window boxes, and planters (well made, traditional look, and may be left out all year), stainless steel hardware for outdoor use is rusts resistant (look for 'nautical' hardware), mark your young native plants (pencils are a cheap, biodegradable option I use)-easy to confuse weeds with young native plants.

14. Allow native bees to survive overwintering in stems: Leave stems on plants for winter food and cover, remove stems in late winter/early spring and store in a 'stem frame' (Dave Tylka) as bees may not emerge until summer, and then use stems in autumn for mulch or recycle. Use scrap lumber to make a 2 foot x 2 foot x 3 foot tall frame (I use wire on the bottom to hold stems in) for stems-locate
15. Consider your neighbors:
 - With smaller lots, your front yard should blend with your neighbors (a small patch of well tended turf grass).
 - Visually 'borrow' the view from their landscape AND offer visual and auditory (water features) delights from your garden for them to enjoy
 - Talk with your neighbors-how can your garden design help them? (screening, removal of invasives [bush honeysuckle], etc.)?
 - Be 100% certain of your lot line (get a survey) before putting up permanent structures (fences, driveways, etc.) or planning beds.
16. Order by botanical name (genus and species). How many "bee balms" are there? [At least 21 species and 50 cultivars, <https://www.homestratosphere.com/types-of-bee-balm-flowers/>.]
17. Pots and window boxes for continuous color using Missouri Botanical Gardens "plants of merit" (most are non-natives) for best St. Louis growth. "Plants of Merit": "selected for their outstanding quality and dependable performance...easy to grow and maintain, not known to be invasive, resistant or tolerant to diseases and insects,...outstanding ornamental value, (and) reasonable available to purchase." [<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/plants-of-merit>]
 - Spring bulbs (planted in the autumn)-you can "layer" bulbs in a pot for prolonged blooming.
 - Summer Plant of Merit annuals for pots and window boxes
 - Autumn mums
 - Winter greenery and holiday decorations
18. Native plants ARE food for wildlife...BUT when to protect the plant from wildlife damage (or give up)? I use chicken wire around bushes until they are tall and 'woody' enough to resist damage from wildlife. BUT if smaller plants are repetitively destroyed, plant something else.
19. Recycle pots and plant labels: Papillon Nursery or check with your local nursery.
20. I prefer nurseries that feature native plants: greater variety, more stock, and better source of knowledge (see native plant resource guide above).
21. "Weeds are plants out of place." Natives can become weeds and 'weeds' can be welcome volunteers in the garden. Be open to both options.
22. Explore ephemerals (quick blooming early flowers providing early color before fading away). Can be planted in lawns for early (or late) burst of color.
23. Plant identification apps (such as PictureThis at \$30/year) help you identify plants you discover and may want to add to your garden.
24. Be sensitive to how your garden interacts with the natural environment:
 - Use low level down lighting to 'save the night sky'.
 - Use leaf mulch rather than bark mulch to help ground nesting insects.
 - Avoid insecticides; they kill the good with the 'bad'.
 - Consider industrial vinegar to kill weeds rather than chemical herbicides.
 - Use the minimum amount of long acting 'natural' fertilizers (chemical and heavy metal free compost) to avoid runoff.
25. The Challenge: Create my 'perfect garden':
 - Low maintenance

- Natural but with a “tailored”, traditional appearance for my 1/4 acre lot in a traditional neighborhood.
 - Water features for tranquility, movement, koi, and water for wildlife/water plants
 - 4 season interest
 - Continuous color
 - Incorporating fruits, herbs, cut flowers, and vegetables
 - Attractive to wildlife
 - Functional living space(s) for outdoor dining and relaxation *within* the garden.
 - Pleasing to my neighbors
 - Educating and reconnecting me with nature
26. MY style of garden: The English Cottage Garden (with a touch of Japanese Koi Pond):
- Since the 1400’s families used dense plantings of natives providing food, herbs, medicinals, and flowers in abundance on their small plots of land.
 - “An English cottage garden is formal in design, formal in layout, but INformal in planting.” Paddy Bowe, English landscape architect.
 - “A little of a lot.” Using numerous different plants in small amounts as ‘drifts’ of color. Mixing fruits and vegetables with your flowering and specimen plants.
 - “Select 1/3 as evergreens for winter interest, 1/3 for autumn color interest, and 1/3 primarily for flowering interest.” Paddy Bowe
 - Turf grass is NOT traditional with cottage gardens but can be used as a path to access flower beds. Re-think turf grass as a pathway rather than a “yard”.
 - Use colorful pots and window boxes for accents with long lasting annuals.
 - Using natural materials (stone, wood, etc.) in the landscape, as if the garden grew up spontaneously.
 - Create an overall plan, start small and progress in steps to savor the success, be patient, learn from your successes/failure/serendipity, experiment, make changes, and allow your plan and garden to evolve.
27. Mix in fruits and vegetables *suitable* for St. Louis growing.
- Edible native plants trees, bushes, and groundcovers (*Fragaria-wild strawberry*).
 - MBG “Fruits for the St. Louis Area”
 - Consider non-native dwarf (8-10 feet tall), semi-dwarf (12 to 15 feet tall), and standard sized (18-20 feet tall) fruit trees as specimen plants or espalier (grown flat against a wall , trellis or fence). See the MBG list for best choices.
 - Vegetables can be grown in a dedicated vegetable area (easier to protect from animal damage OR in open garden spaces (in Europe they use black plastic crates to protect plants from animals).