GO WILD

TEXT BY LISA HARRISON

Homeowners in the Highlands are realizing that, in many cases, nature does it best. Discover how using naturalist planting can enhance your cottage – and your own well-being.

Naturalizing, wildscaping, the New Perennial Movement – whatever you choose to call it, returning a property to a more natural statew is beneficial to the environment and to property owners.

"The new buzzword is wildscaping," says Carolyn Langdon, director of Wild Edibles Haliburton and a member of the Haliburton County Master Gardeners.

"More and more property owners are discovering that nature does it best ... There is a huge and growing interest in wildscaping or naturalist planting design and for good reason."

New desire for space and nature

"The pandemic has made more people aware that nature plays a big role in human health," says Sable Robertson, ecologist and author of the Earth to Salad blog. Robertson isolated with her fiancé and his parents at Moore Lake this spring as the family expanded their naturalizing work on the property.

"Having a space to experience nature and have a break from the indoors and city life is very important," said Robertson.

"As more people had time in the spring to do landscaping there seemed to be a shortage of plants and materials for the huge influx of interested gardeners."

In addition, many people who found themselves unemployed or working from home and fearing food shortages decided to grow some of their own food this year, according to Langdon.

The many benefits of wildscaping

Native plants are generally more resistant to pests and disease because they have adapted to the area over millennia. This can eliminate pesticide use and the resulting chemical runoff into the water table. Native plants are long-living and require little maintenance.

A naturalized landscape provides food, shelter and protective cover for wildlife. Naturalized properties can also provide food and medicine for people. Deforestation causes erosion, drought and climate instability, says Langdon.

Wildscaping can save money otherwise spent on expensive, less hardy plants and on gas for the carbon-emitting lawn mower. Air conditioning costs can drop with the addition of trees and the reduction of reflective surfaces such as hardscaping.

There are also benefits to personal health, says Robertson.

"Physical health is improved by the activity of planting the species and the oxygen increase nearby, mental health through the exposure of nature, even looking out their window, and spiritual health because of the deep-rooted sense of belonging that humans and nature have imprinted in their genetic and biological coding."

Designing your wildscape

Autumn is a good time to work on both your plan and the land, according to Stephanie Field.

Field is president of Friends of Ecological and Environmental Learning (FEEL), a charitable organization that hosts a popular native plant sale in May to raise funds for the Haliburton-Muskoka-Kawartha Lakes Children's Water Festival.

FEEL takes online orders for native perennials, trees and shrubs as well as rain barrels. Field says they hope to begin as early as November this year. FEEL can also provide advice on the best plant choices for your property.

By starting to plan now, you'll have your order ready for your supplier and you can begin preparing your property so you can plant as quickly as possible when the stock arrives, notes Field.

Rebecca Krawczyk, owner/operator of Botanigals native plant nursery, promotes "greenscaping" over landscaping with hard materials. She sees trees, shrubs, wildflowers and groundcovers as "a gentle way to guide traffic flow through an outdoor space".

"Once these paths are established, cottage-style stonework can be introduced to prevent compaction and erosion along favourite trails to activity areas."

Krawczyk recommends consulting the right experts, such as ecologists and arborists, before you dig. They may be able to save you money by avoiding the need for hard materials, tree replacement and more.

Waterfront property owners are advised to consider the County's proposed shoreline preservation bylaw when planning. The first step in shoreline preservation can begin immediately by allowing the 30-metre-deep "ribbon of life" along the shoreline to naturalize.

"These [ribbons] are nature's grocery stores, daycare centres, community spaces, mating spots, and shelter," says Krawczyk.

Naturalizing the ribbon will filter runoff, protect slopes from erosion, provide an important corridor around the lake for small wildlife, and more.

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Carolyn Langdon on her naturalized property with Blue Wood Aster (left foreground), white-flowered Yarrow (centre) and yellow-flowered Rudbeckia (right).

The right choice

When choosing plants, you'll want to look for those native to two distinct environments.

Haliburton County was originally covered primarily by forest, which means native plants and shrubs love shade. However, development has reduced the tree canopy and created properties with full sun conditions, so those owners will need to consider plants native to the tallgrass prairies of Southern Ontario, said Langdon.

The county is in Zone 4 of the Canadian rating system for plant hardiness. This is tempered by location, such as a south-facing sheltered spot versus a flat, open space on the north side of a property.

Other factors to consider when choosing your plants include sun exposure preferences, soil type, symbiotic species, pests, and overall fragility, since much of the county is windy.

Langdon's suggested plant choices include Black-eyed-Susan, Coneflower, New England Aster, Canada Anemone, Cylindrical Blazing Star, Culver's Root, Tall Ironweed, and Wild Roses. She also lists Foxglove Beard Tongue, Wild Bergamot, Multi-coloured Blue-flag Iris, Sneezeweed, Wild Strawberry, Boneset and Spotted Joe-pye-weed, plus various grasses, sedges and rushes (avoid the invasive miscanthus and phragmites).

Shrub suggestions include Red Berried Elder, any of the Serviceberries, Red Osier Dogwood (red branches for winter interest), Pagoda Dogwood, and High Bush Cranberry.

For full-size trees that are resilient in a changing climate, Langdon likes Basswood or American Linden, Ironwood, Red Oak, Wild Black Cherry, and any of the nut trees.

Back to the future

A bonus with many of these old-world plants is their ongoing value in the new world for food and medicine.

Langdon is taking the next step in cultivating native plants on her property by developing an edible and medicinal garden called Windfall Food Forest.

The Master Gardeners are also branching out. Members have been visiting property owners to help them resolve issues from failed perennial beds to waterfront rehabilitation.

"Horticulturalists were to have met in Toronto this autumn to talk about re-wilding their landscapes, " said Langdon. "They want back what we have – a natural landscape that is a bit woolly and wild. It's up to us to value what we have and see the beauty that is around us. No rototiller or herbicide required."

Sources of plants and advice

Botanigals
Native plant: nursery installation
Algonquin Highlands
botanigals@hotmail.com
botanigals.ca

Country Rose Floral Shop & Garden Centre
Perennial & annual plants, shrubs and trees. New location: 13513 Hwy 118, Haliburton. 705-457-3774
countryroseflowers.ca

Ground Covers Unlimited
Wholesale nursery Cultivated and native plants useful as groundcovers. 1045 Porter Rd, Bethany. 705-277-3005. groundcoversunlimited.ca
groundcoversunlimited@gmail.com

The Land Between
Shoreline naturalization
Consultation/implementation
Haliburton. 705-457-1222
info@thelandbetween.ca
thelandbetween.ca

Grow Wild Native Plant Nurseries
Native plants, trees. Landscape restoration 3784 ON-7, Omemee. 416-735-7490. grow-wild.com

Rockwood Forest Nurseries
Trees, landscape design, soil analysis
437 Mark Road, Cameron ON
705-374-4700 / 1-888-833-0473
info@rockwoodforest.com
rockwoodforest.com

More information

Wild Edibles Haliburton / Windfall Food Forest
windfallfoodforest@gmail.com
facebook.com/wildedibleshaliburton

Coalition of Haliburton Property Owners' Associations (CHA)
cohpoa@gmail.com
cohpoa.org

Earth to Salad
earthtosalad.wixsite.com/earthtosalad

Friends of Ecological and Environmental Learning (FEEL) Native Plant Sale
ecoenvirolearn.org/native-plants

Haliburton County Master Gardeners
halmastergardener@gmail.com
haliburtonmastergardener.ca