Gardening

Creating your own garden with native, organic plants

Gardener Daniel Carroll compares traditional, non-native gardens to franchise restaurants like McDonald's or Wendy's. "There's no variety. It's all homogenized," he says.

By Amy Cavalier

A different type of garden is emerging amidst the sharply manicured, landscape yards and gardens in Onondaga and Oswego counties. Gardener and owner of Great Lakes Horticulture, Daniel Carroll is going against the grain and encouraging people to take a new approach to gardening this year. With a mix of organic and native gardening techniques, Carroll is helping people to create their own "backyard sanctuaries," reflective of Central New York's natural ecosystem.

Most of the gardens around Central New York are made up of non-native plants. "A native garden is not as tight or neat," said Carroll, "but, that's because you are using nature as a model." Carroll compares traditional, non-native gardens to franchise restaurants like McDonald's or Wendy's. "There's no variety," he said. "It's all homogenized. With this type of garden you are using plants and materials native to our geographic area. So, when you do a garden in New York, its not like one in Maine, or Arizona."

A native, organic garden has many benefits over the more traditional, landscaped gardens. They use less water, create less waste, attract native species of butterflies, birds, and beneficial insects, and require less maintenance in the long run, according to Carroll. "Native plants are more well adapted to our extreme climate, are able to recover from drought, and are not as overrun with pest problems," Carroll said.

You can start a native, organic garden from scratch, or you can begin converting your landscaped lawn into a more natural setting anytime from May to mid-November, if you can stand the cold.

First off, Carroll stressed, do not take plants from the wild because some may be protected. He recommends ordering nursery grown plants, or joining a garden club. "People in the garden club can help you locate plants easier and many clubs have plant exchanges." Carroll said most native plants in Central New York gardens come from out west, or from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. "You want to purchase plants from as close as possible," said Carroll. "It can take a lot of work," but, Carroll said, "that's part of what happens with this type of garden. In doing all this out-sourcing work, you really start to get a sense of what's going on in your backyard and with the local ecology."

Secondly, Carroll said a native, organic garden requires a different approach to maintenance. He says you must be careful not to over-prune. "In this type of design, you place like plants together and let them grow together more, rather than placing several species of plants in one area and pruning them in a rigid fashion." Over-pruning stresses the plant, said Carroll. "If a plant is over-pruned or root-bound from improper placement, it is going to cause the plant to be stressed and more susceptible to pests or disease."

After pruning, instead of removing debris from the garden, Carroll recommends you leave the waste in the garden. "When you clip a plant, leave the scrap under the plant to re-nourish the soil. " Carroll said landscaped gardens rely heavily on chemicals to fertilize and control pests, where an organic garden uses none.

An organic, native garden isn't going to be any lower-maintenance than a traditional, landscaped garden for the first few years, however, said Carroll. "It's going to be a little more maintenance intensive for the first two or three seasons as things get established and plants start to grow together. Once the garden begins to reach its mature state though," Carroll said, "the maintenance goes down considerably."

Another difference between organic, native gardens and more traditional gardens is the lawn. In an organic garden, Carroll said, the lawn takes a second or third stage, rather than being the main element. "You really need to change your perception of what a lawn is and reduce the amount of grass by increasing the size of beds and planting grasses that don't have to be mowed as much." This will also cut down on maintenance, Carroll said.

Weeds are also an important part of these natural gardens. "You definitely have to become more accepting of weeds. Weeds serve a purpose," Carroll said. "A lawn with no weeds is a monoculture with no opportunities for insects to grow and prosper. Most insects are very beneficial and not too problematic. The wholesale elimination of bugs from a lawn creates a very sterile environment." The results of these gardening techniques can be amazing Carroll said. "You create something more introspective," he said. "Instead of the typical garden, which is more for looking at, organic, native gardens are more for spending time in, and looking outward at your surroundings." Carroll said this style of garden encourages you to spend more time in your yard and gives you a better appreciation of where you are.