

NATURALLY: Native species grow on gardeners

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Some seek a bit of the wild into their yards; others w

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All species at the Harriet Irving Botanical Gardens in Wolfville are native to the Acadian Forest Region. The gardens are a great place to learn about native plants and the natural habitats of our Acadian forest region. (DAVID PATRIQUIN)

Sometimes it takes a visitor to make us appreciate what we take for granted.

Such was the case when Panayoti Kelaidis, an iconic figure in the horticultural world from Colorado, visited Nova Scotia recently as a guest of the Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society.

Kelaidis was simply beside himself in his enthusiasm for Rhodora, our native deciduous azalea, just then coming into full bloom. That didn't surprise me nor did his description of our Atlantic coast jack pine-broom crowberry barrens: "I kept thinking 'Japanese garden' as I looked around the area — the gnarly little jack pines and the rich texture of ground cover could easily be tweaked to create a heavenly Japanese garden, but why bother — I prefer what's already here."



But when he enthused about common alder and a bog sedge, I had to take a second look at those species and think about how they might be expressed in a horticultural landscape.

Nova Scotians are becoming more curious about growing native species in our urban habitats. Some simply want to bring a bit of wildness into their yards. Some do it to support native pollinators or native biodiversity more broadly. (Halifax Regional Municipality now prefers to plant native tree species.)

Others may value particular native species for their use as food (blackberries, blueberries) or as medicinal herbs (wild ginseng).

Kelaidis would have us imagine particular esthetic attributes of our native species in a horticultural setting.

Adding gypsum to the soil and restricting drainage provides optimal conditions for Swamp Milkweed (a host for monarch butterflies), Cutleaf Conflower and Cardinal Flower.

There are two essentials for cultivating native species. The first is a source of propagules (seed, seedlings, cuttings, whole plants). More plant nurseries, but still too few, provide native species grown from cuttings or seed or propagated by tissue culture, and for a number of species, horticultural lines have been selected. See www.nswildflora.ca/naturalization (<http://nswildflora.ca/links/conservNatural.html>) for local nurseries and seedhouses offering native species.

The other option is to obtain species directly from the wild. Nature will forgive us for carefully removing a few seedlings by a red oak or other species that are common and abundant locally. However, attempts to transplant more particular or less common types, such as orchids, are likely to be unsuccessful as well as damaging to the local population.

Collecting seeds or taking cuttings from the wild is perhaps the most benign approach.

It's best to assume that seeds will require vernalizing (cold treatment) before they will germinate. Some may require more than a year to germinate, so find out what to expect for a particular species by searching the web or consulting one of the many books written on this subject, or just experiment.

We should definitely avoid digging up plants from intact natural areas, but it may be appropriate to rescue plants from areas where they are clearly slated to be eradicated, like around road construction, ditches, shopping malls and parking lots, or from recently cut areas about to be sprayed with herbicide. Such actions help to preserve natural biodiversity.



A cinnamon fern where once there were hostas.

Provision of appropriate growing conditions is the second essential consideration.

Some wild species, such as calico aster, thrive in typical garden conditions, but species that grow naturally in acidic, nutrient-poor environments don't do well in soils built up with compost and fertilizers, and may require a lot of peat to reduce fertility and acidify the soil.

That's a bit of an issue for carbon-conscious gardeners who want to avoid using peat. (Mining peat destroys natural habitats and, like fossil fuels, releases excess carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.)



A small patch of deciduous woodland where there was once a lawn on South Street in Halifax.

On the other hand, naturally acid habitats are common in much of Nova Scotia in areas of granite, slates and siltstones, and support a host of shrubs and ground covers of the heath and holly families that are highly appealing esthetically. These would include bearberry, broom crowberry, lambkill, huckleberry and mayflower in drier habitats; rhodora, Labrador tea, leatherleaf, mountain holly and Canada holly in wetter habitats, and inkberry in both.

Some of the most serene landscaping I have seen occurs around residences where such natural habitat has been retained, even to the point that reindeer lichens on boulders next to the houses were not disturbed during their construction. The best landscaping and the most nature-friendly sometimes requires no effort at all.

The Harriet Irving Botanical Gardens at Acadia is a wonderful place to learn about native plants of our Acadian forest region and to view them in constructed settings designed to mimic their natural habitats. Staff and volunteers also propagate a number of species from seed for sale to support the gardens. Canada anemone, swamp milkweed, turtlehead, marsh marigold, cutleaf coneflower, cardinal flower and black-eyed Susans are some that now thrive in my garden from that source

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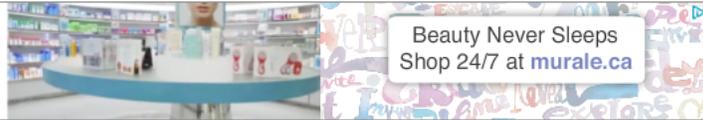
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