

## Book Review: *Bringing Nature Home*

By Kim Smith

“Occasionally we encounter a concept so obvious and intuitive that we have never thought to articulate it, so close to our noses that we could not see it, so entangled with our everyday experiences that we did not recognize it...the wild creatures we enjoy and would like to have in our lives will not be here in the future if we take away their food and places they live.” In Douglas Tallamy’s recently published book *Bringing Nature Home* he thoroughly examines and eloquently makes the case that the survival of wildlife is threatened by uncontrolled expansion. But this is not just a book that overwhelms with a plethora of dire statistics. The author provides real solutions for creating balanced communities; gardening for diversity, how to make it happen, and what to plant.

Over the past century American horticultural writers have been urging gardeners to grow native plants. A number of different types of gardens were promoted in the popular garden writing of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—articles on Italian, city, bog, water, winter, children’s, and window boxes are just some examples. But it was the idea of growing native that had an ideological significance. The term “wild gardening” was in widespread use in American popular culture. English gardens and the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement in America created a lively interest in perennials and color schemes, as well as a strong interest for what we today think of as the natural garden. The garden historian Virginia Tuttle Clayton defines the natural garden as a “cultivated area meant to embody an idealized vision of untouched nature.” Gardeners of yesteryear extolled a variety of social, moral, and economic reasons for creating the wild garden. Similarly, Tallamy points out that if he were to ask a random group of gardeners of what is the importance of cultivating with native plants, most would probably describe creating a sense of place, the dangers of releasing yet another invasive species, costly wastefulness of sterile lawns, broad leaf herbicides, and pollution-belching lawn mowers. Transcending individual needs, the author conveys that the most compelling reason “is the use of native species to create simplified vestiges of the ecosystems that once made this land such a rich source of life for its indigenous people, and later, for European colonists and their descendants.”

Worldwide there are few places left for wildlife, save for the landscapes and gardens we create. Flora and fauna co-evolved over millennia. Wildlife species everywhere are in crisis because they are unable to adapt to the rapid rate of the destruction of their food, shelter and habitats. Indigenous insects simply cannot eat non-native plants. As native plants disappear and are replaced with alien and invasive exotic species, insects also disappear. Birds and small animals that rely on insects become impoverished, and then they too become extinct.

Landscape ecologists have determined that between 95 and 97 percent of land in the United States, excluding Alaska, is “disturbed,” in other words, modified for our use. At this point in our collective knowledge, everyone is aware that habitat fragmentation is a crisis that is happening worldwide and that all species need large, biodiverse areas to prevent extinction. The author urges, “unless we modify the places we work, live, and play to meet not only our needs but the needs of other species as well, nearly all species of wildlife native to the United States will disappear forever...Like it or not, gardeners have become important players in the management

of our nation's wildlife. It is now within the power of individual gardeners to do something that we all dream: "to make a difference." In this case, the "difference" will be to the future of biodiversity, to the native plants and animals of North America and the ecosystems that sustain them."

By planting native flora gardeners provide life-sustaining habitats for native fauna. Tallamy is not pressing for a major overhaul of existing gardens, but rather a gradual change that increasingly reflects regional fauna. There are valuable cautionary lessons to be learned. One example cited, among the many provided, is of the Douglas fir, which when planted in the Pacific Northwest grows in the community it was created. The same tree planted in the Northeast is divorced from its community of organisms and evolutionary history and will not function as a native to that area. The objective is to concentrate on planting locally specific species to your particular region. "Because food for all animals starts with the energy harnessed from plants, the plants we grow in our gardens have the critical role of sustaining directly, or indirectly, all animals with which we share our living space." *Bringing Nature Home* is a treasure trove of information, rich with helpful photographs and the ideas are presented accessibly.

Douglas Tallamy, Professor and Chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware, is giving a walk through the Arnold Arboretum on the subject of Complexity and Connection, Thursday May 22<sup>nd</sup> from 2:30 to 5:00pm; presentation on Bees, Birds, Butterflies, and Biodiversity, later the evening of May 22, <sup>nd</sup> from 7:00-8:30pm; and seminar on Gardening with Native Plants to Support the Web of Life at The New England Wildflower Society's Garden in the Woods on Friday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> from 9:30am to 12:30pm. *Bringing Nature Home* by Douglas W. Tallamy. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press. Available from Toad Hall Bookstore and the New England Wild Flower Society.

*Pearly Crescentspot and New York Aster*





*Monarch and New England Aster*