

Growing Native at Willowdale Estate

By Kim Smith

Willowdale Estate, presently a fully operating special events facility, was the former mansion of the prominent Boston attorney and industrialist Bradley Palmer. Located within the Bradley Palmer State Park in Topsfield Massachusetts, Willowdale is surrounded by 700 acres of woodland forest, gently rolling meadows, and vibrant wetlands. I became acquainted with Briar Forsythe, the proprietor of Willowdale, when she and her site director, Emily Goss, commissioned me to design and build a butterfly and songbird garden to enhance the courtyard where weddings and special events are held.

Willowdale is rich with Arts and Crafts inspired architectural decoration meticulously restored by the Fandetti-Forsythe family. Wherever you turn in the lambent light of the public rooms, finely wrought handwork catches your eye—artisan-crafted stained glass and painted tiles, subtle tone-on-tone pattern inlays in the wood flooring, and exquisitely carved woodwork are only a handful of the stunning nature-inspired ornamentation that makes Willowdale enchanting. The exterior stone structure, with burnished terracotta roof tiles, fresh Granny Smith apple green trim, and cheery red doors, resonates with warmth and elegance, and has a decidedly storybook feeling. With that in mind, we designed the butterfly garden to provide four seasons of beauty to enhance any event or social gathering. As Willowdale is located in a natural woodland setting, we would be loath to introduce, or exacerbate, existing problems with invasive plant species.

Throughout the American Arts and Crafts movement, and well into the 1930's, home and garden magazines, among the most influential sources of ideas for the homeowner, espoused the use of native plants in the landscape. Perhaps the most notable was Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman*, which was published for fifteen years, beginning in 1901. Stickley revered the North American white oak (*Quercus alba*), admiring it for its majestic role in the eastern forest and for its unique strength and figuring of the wood for furniture making. A sense of connectedness to nature is at the heart of the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement and the popular writing of the era reflects how to create this relationship.

I am reminded of a lovely and memorable cover of *Country Living* for the September 1905 issue featuring a drift of rose mallows (*Hibiscus moscheutos*), which resemble and are closely related to hollyhocks (*Alcea rosea*). Both are members of the Malvaceae or Mallow Family. *Hibiscus moscheutos* are commonly referred to as crimson-eyed rose mallow and also marsh mallow, because the roots were used to make marshmallows. Rose mallows are a practical and economical native perennial as they reliably return year after year, unlike hollyhocks, although charming and beautiful, are short-lived (with the exception of *Alcea rugosa*). Rose mallows bloom in shades of pale pink to deeper rosey pink, from July through the first frost. Although found growing in marshy areas along stream and river banks, rose mallows will flourish in the garden when provided with rich moist soil and planted in a sunny location. New growth is slow to emerge in the spring. When cutting back the expired stalks after the first hard frost of autumn, leave a bit of the woody stalk to mark its spot for the following year. The leaves of *Hibiscus moscheutos* are a host plant for the Gray Hairstreak butterfly and the flowers provide nectar for Ruby-throated hummingbirds.

As stewards of this special estate, we are taking extra care to grow only plants that are either regional to the northeast or are exceptionally well-behaved ornamentals. Taking cues from

the surrounding landscape, an example of a newly planted border are a selection of *Rhododendron catawbiense* cultivars arranged beneath the limbs of a native pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*), all encircled by lower growing and similarly acid-loving ferns, wildflowers, and groundcovers. The *R. catawbiense* provides nectar for hummingbirds, the berries of the pagoda dogwood nourish songbirds and the lowbush blueberries are a larval host plant for Azure butterflies. It is a bit more challenging to supply native plants; we are so conditioned by what is readily available in the market place. Searching for regional trees and shrubs is not one-stop-shopping, but it can be done. I suggest consulting with your local grower and requesting native plants. When demand is created, suppliers will provide. Often indigenous wildflowers make great passalongs as they grow healthy and propagate themselves. Sharing wildflowers is a great way to procure plants for your garden. Collecting seeds is also ideal. And—a gentle reminder—the worst method is to dig a wildflower from its native habitat. Imagine what would happen if everybody collected wildflowers.

End Note: In partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, Willowdale Estate is one of a handful of properties that has been restored in conjunction with the historic curatorship program. Under the agreement, the private curator enters into a long-term lease with the DCR. The curator pays rent in the form of services, specifically the rehabilitation and maintenance of the property. With the state in possession of over one hundred historic homes and the Department of Conservation and Recreation facing \$1.6 billion in deferred maintenance, Willowdale is an exciting example of a creative public and private partnership in which the residents of Massachusetts truly benefit.

Morning Glory Embowered Entryway to Willowdale Courtyard



Crimson-eyed rose mallow ~ Hibiscus moscheutos

