

BRINGING NATURE HOME

A book review
By Ron Houser

Some of us in the environmental community have long advocated the use of native plants in our home landscape, mostly to cut down on watering, fertilizing and use of pesticides. With numerous positive reviews, **Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife With Native Plants** by Dr. Douglas Tallamy goes far beyond that general recommendation. Tallamy shows us that not only do the above measures require less work for us in the long run, they are what will be required to save North American biodiversity. I was dismayed to learn that the amount of undisturbed natural areas remaining in the U.S. is less than 10% of what it used to be. This, among other factors such as habitat fragmentation, is not enough to keep large-scale extinction from occurring. As the author shows through studies, there is a 1:1 relationship between the amount of habitat loss and the number of extinct species. This means that if you lose 50% of natural habitat, you eventually lose 50% of the animal species there. An entomologist and ecology professor at the University of Delaware, Dr. Tallamy provides compelling reasons why we, as home and landowners, can slow the rate of extinction by widespread use of native plants in suburban areas and woodlots. By doing so, the other key component, native insects, will be able to thrive and provide necessary food for birds and other animals. Most birds need animal protein and fat as well as fruits and seeds to survive and reproduce. Alien (non-native) plants, including most everything developers, landscapers and large home-and-garden stores sell us do not provide insect food for the birds because these plants and our native insects have not evolved together. In other words, most insects can not assimilate chemicals found in plants they have never been exposed to. As the author states: "A plant that has not fed something has not done its job." Admittedly, the idea of trying to attract insects to a home landscape will not go over too well for those who are used to planting "pest-free" alien plants and liberally using pesticides, but the open-minded reader will learn that this practice is harmful and counterintuitive. After all, less than two percent of insects are considered pests. The others are very beneficial to the environment.

A remarkably easy book to read, the second half of the book includes descriptions of native plants that are best to use in different regions of the country and lists them in order of importance. For example, I learned that oak trees are hosts to 534 species of Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths). Other chapters show us what bird food (insects) looks like, with numerous photographs and descriptions of various insect groups and their fascinating qualities and lifestyles.

Aware that few of us readers will want to tear out all our existing plants to replace them with natives, Dr. Tallamy shows us how we can introduce natives into our existing yards and have an attractive, more interesting yard and still be on good terms with the neighbors. It is really a fallacy that native plants are not as attractive as others. A look through any book on native plants will quickly show that isn't the case.

“Answers to Tough Questions” is the title for one of the last chapters of the book. Here, questions such as “Why can’t we let nature take its course and just leave aliens alone?” are eloquently and convincingly answered. Butterfly gardening, three-dimensional garden design and mulching are topics discussed as well.

Truly an eye-opening work, I think this book could be just as important as Rachel Carson’s “**Silent Spring**”, which ushered in the environmental movement of the 50’s and 60’s. Using it as a guide and following its recommendations, committed gardeners can become backyard ecologists and be able to help answer the question we are asked the most: “Where have all the birds gone?”