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## BOOK REVIEW

# The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden

Doug Tallamy and Rick Darke

Published by Timber Press. 392 pages. ISBN-10: 1604694084

Review by Ginny Stibolt

*The Living Landscape* is a beautiful coffee table book graced with Rick Darke's color photos on every page. Doubtless many people outside the native plant community would be surprised that these plants are natives and that native-based landscapes could look so civilized. You could learn much about how native ecosystems work from this large book – it's 8.5" x 10" and almost 400 pages.

### The content

The book's five chapters include: Layers in Wild Landscapes; The Community of Living Organisms: Why Interrelationships Matter More than Numbers; The Ecological Functions of Gardens: What Landscapes Do; The Art of Observation; and Applying Layers to the Home Garden. Chapters include personal essays by each of the authors – Darke's pages are tan, while Tallamy's are blue.

The lessons on layers and ecotones and how to add them to home landscapes are explained clearly and accompanied by appropriate photos. The section on birds and what they require in the landscape is well done, and information on the importance of insects is found throughout the book. The reader will come away with a clear understanding of how ecosystems work and why native plants are important even on a small scale such as the typical urban or suburban yard.

This book provides important lessons on landscape design with examples using native plant material and could be useful in the training of landscape architects and professional landscape installers. Maybe Darke's gorgeous photos will change people's perception of what is beautiful and will encourage the creation of landscapes based on native plants instead of exotics.

With few exceptions, the photos are of the Mid-Atlantic region and focus on relatively large landscapes including Longwood Gardens. While I appreciate the depiction of the progress of landscapes over time and through the seasons, and the aerial and roadside shots of mature woodlands, the book would have been much more useful if it contained pictures of smaller landscapes. Examples of how layering and habitat building can happen on small lots would help readers visualize ways to accomplish this in their own yards. I was disappointed to see only a single photo of a relatively small landscape, which was taken in a botanical garden and not someone's yard. One exception to the Mid-Atlantic focus is the inclusion of an example of the dependence of insects on their host plants featuring coontie (*Zamia pumila*) and the atala butterfly (*Eumaeus atala*), both native to Florida.

Appendices include charts titled "Landscape and Ecological Functions of Plants." These charts use symbols for each ecosystem service, and list details such as whether a particular plant provides cover for wildlife, nest sites for birds, if it flowers extensively, and other useful information. Charts cover several regions, beginning with the Mid-Atlantic (the emphasis of this book), followed by the Southeast, Southwest, Pacific Northwest, Midwest & Mountain states, and New England. There are separate authors for each region.

### What is native?

The Florida Native Plant Society defines a native plant as occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. Florida native plants include those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

Darke and Tallamy define native as "a plant or animal that has evolved in a given place over a period of time sufficient to develop complex and essential relationships with the physical environment and other organisms in a given ecological community."

Using this description, which does not specify a time scale or take into consideration human effects on ecosystems, couldn't oleander (*Nerium oleander*), be considered native on some level? Oleander is now almost the exclusive larval food source of the oleander moth or polka-dotted wasp moth (*Syntomeida epilais*). This insect is native to Florida and used to feed on a relatively rare member of the dogbane family, Apocynaceae. But over the 500 years since the Spanish first brought oleanders from their home country, the insects have made the switch and now occur wherever oleanders are planted except California. Perhaps the definition of native used in the book should be revised to include the effects of human impact.

### Plant lists

For the plant lists in the back of the book, the authors took some understandable shortcuts so each plant would take up one line of text. The Mid-Atlantic list covers two pages, while other regions are allowed one page each.

Disturbingly, the plant list for the Mid-Atlantic includes the exotic *Ginkgo biloba*, native to China, with its one ecological function of carbon sequestration. The comments mention that

the roasted seeds are edible, but the ginkgo's putrid-smelling fruit reeks of butyric acid. It is so obnoxious and messy that most of the planted trees are clones of male trees. *Ginkgo biloba* is strangely out of place in a book on native plants. It is also odd to find coontie (*Zamia pumila*) included as a shrub for the Mid-Atlantic region, when it only occurs in Florida and southernmost Georgia.

The list of plants for the Southeast was written by Larry Mellichamp, author of *Native Plants of the Southeast*. The list includes 206 plants, but many of these do not even occur as far south as northern Florida. Some of the plant choices are questionable. For instance, the list includes the endemic Florida yew (*Taxus floridana*), which only occurs in one county and is not commonly sold in the native plant trade. Coontie, a useful native plant, is not on the list for the Southeast. Closer editing would have helped this section, including a crosscheck the latest scientific binomials. Red chokeberry (*Photinia pyrifolia*) is referred to by its old name, *Aronia arbutifolia*, and it is listed as a shade producing plant in its landscape functions for the Southeast, but not in the Mid-Atlantic. I have lived with this lovely plant in both Florida and Maryland and shade production is not one of its characteristics.

## The authors

Both Doug Tallamy and Rick Darke are in demand for speaking engagements throughout the country, and FNPS has invited them to be keynote speakers at our annual conference (Doug Tallamy more than once). Their presentations have been well-received and were truly inspirational. Many of us celebrated Tallamy's book *Bringing Nature Home* because it provided clarity and science to the argument for native plants in the landscape.

## Conclusion

This attractive book has many positive attributes. Native plant advocates will be able to glean new and interesting information on the concept of habitat services and learn a lot more about how ecosystems work – useful for education and outreach efforts. Landscape designers will be inspired by the lovely photographs that may possibly change the paradigm as to what a beautiful landscape should look like.

Unfortunately, neither Florida or small landscapes are well covered, making the book less useful for Florida gardeners. I looked forward to *The Living Landscape* and eagerly pre-ordered a copy, but I doubt it will have as much impact on Florida native plant enthusiasts as Tallamy and Darke's previous books.

### About the Author

Ginny Stibolt is a life-long gardener with an MS in botany from the University of Maryland, and has written about Florida gardening since 2004. She is the author of *Sustainable Gardening for Florida*, 2009; *Organic Methods for Vegetable Gardening in Florida*, 2013; and *The Art of Maintaining a Native Landscape*, to be released in 2015 (all published by University Press of Florida). Ginny is an administrator for the FNPS Facebook page and is one of FNPS' main bloggers. Her own blog about gardening is at [www.GreenGardeningMatters.com](http://www.GreenGardeningMatters.com).