



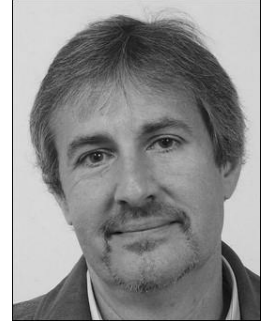
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Making Our Backyard Truly Green

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David Weintraub

ECO NOTES



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Happy spring, finally. Watching apparently dead wood explode in a cascade of green never fails to amaze me. It's as if nature demonstrates its enduring optimism by saying, 'no matter what's wrong with the world, the earth will renew itself yet again, repair the damage and awaken anew.' That optimism is contagious as I awaken to the chatter of the tufted titmouse, northern cardinals, and American goldfinches, all brightening my bedroom window.

When my family moved from the city to the suburbs, my father discovered his "green" thumb. He was determined to have the greenest grass, the least number of nasty dandelions and crab grass of anyone in the neighborhood. Of course that meant a trip to the local gardening store to load up on pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers and fungicides. The grass was green and the dandelions perished, but the yard was a dead zone: not a blessed caterpillar, ladybug or honey bee in sight.

In our suburban community I remember the last empty lot, filled with weeds of all sorts, milkweeds, purple deadnettle and clover. As a child it was a wonderland of wood toads, butterflies, flying grasshoppers and other living things of all types. It was their last holdout, a refuge amidst a sea of manicured lawns. When the graders came to scrape away the last of my neighborhood's Lilliputian life to build another cookie cutter house, I mourned their loss.

When I bought my first house I flirted with the notion that nature required chemicals for every season until I adopted my new credo, "I fought the lawn and the lawn won." My heresy has now risen to the point that I have been known to sing to the moss in my yard, encouraging it to please get busy invading every blade of grass.

More importantly, with drought still in our rear window, it's important to consider that what we are doing in our backyards has an effect on our streams and the health of our ecosystems. It's also becoming increasingly clear that whatever we put in our yard and in our gardens will eventually make its way into our bodies, especially children who play and dig in the dirt. They have faster metabolisms and absorb the chemicals we often put on our lawns, many of which contain neurotoxins that have never been proven safe for the little ones.

In order to help search for alternatives to keeping our yards truly green, I've spoken with the Cooperative Extension Service folks in Henderson and Buncombe Counties as well as gathered material from several backyard wildlife sources to come up with a few tips on keeping our garden green:

- 1) Cut down on water. An inch of water used on a 1000 square foot lawn uses 625 gallons.. Use rain barrels to collect rain from your gutters to water your plants and don't waste water on grass, it will do fine without it. Finally, consider using soaker hoses rather than sprinkler systems that waste gobs of water.
- 2) Go Native. Native plants are adapted to live here and attract local wildlife. Avoid "plant of the month club specials" and focus on buying native plants that are drought resistant, require less water and thrive in our climate.
- 3) Use mulch such as pine bark to control weeds and conserve water.
- 4) Select the right plants for the right places. Visualize world peace, but also what your plant will look like five years from now. Choose plants that can thrive in the available sun and space which will save maintenance costs, minimize pest control and create a better interconnected ecosystem for that specific habitat.
- 5) Don't become a garden Rambo. Lawn and garden chemical advertising has taught us to shoot first and ask questions later. Not a good approach for your garden. Figure out your pest problem first before seeking solutions. Cooperative Extension offices will gladly review your samples. There are bacterial treatments, insecticidal soaps and organic fungicides on the market that will rid your garden of the specific pest rather than killing everything including important backyard critters such as lady bugs and honey bees. Consider corn-based weed blockers rather than chemical weed blockers that often contain arsenic!
- 6) If you have grass, minimize the environmental impact of your home lawn by raising the mower's blade to a height of 3 to 4 inches, and leave the grass clippings on the lawn. Taller grass competes better with weeds, and sinks roots deeper into the soil to better withstand mid-summer heat and drought.
- 7) Fertilize your garden, naturally. Chemical fertilizers are made from petroleum, are laden with toxic chemicals and heavy metals and destructive to waterways. Composting of leaves and grasses and discarded vegetable/fruit peelings combined with organic fertilizers (such as fish emulsion, bloodmeal, bonemeal and cow manure) can effectively provide needed nutrients for your plants without harming the environment.

Even if you start with a few of these steps, it can make a difference in the health of the habitats who also call your backyard home. Your family's health will benefit too. Even my dad has reformed his backyard practices and no longer uses chemicals in his yard. Remember, there are no known cases of dandelions polluting our streams, killing off critters or damaging native plants. In fact, dandelion greens are highly nutritious in salad. Enjoy your spring with a newly green backyard.

David Weintraub is the Executive Director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, an organization dedicated to protecting the mountain region's natural heritage. For more information contact ECO at (828)692-0385 or on-line at www.eco-wnc.org.