Why Native Plants Are So Important

In past articles, I have talked about invasive plants and insects. With many native plant sales in full swing here in June, I want to tell you why native plants are so important to the ecological system we live in. But before I do, a little background on how I arrived at this opinion.

Douglas W. Tallamy published a book entitled, “Bringing Nature Home” in 2007. My wife, Michele, purchased and read the ninth edition in 2015 and suggested that I might be interested in the subject matter. Six years later, I finally read Mr. Tallamy’s book and immediately became entralled with his message of bringing nature home. If you haven’t read this book, please obtain a copy and get ready to be awed by his message.

The book describes the interdependent relationship that exists between native plants, insects, birds, pollinators, trees, and small mammals. So let’s start with the basic building block – native plants. Native plants have been around for hundreds of years and have developed relationships with native insects and animals. Most importantly, native plants are the food supply for these many creatures!

As Mr. Tallamy points out, alien plants including autumn olives, oriental bittersweets, Japanese honeysuckles, Bradford pears, Norway maples, and many more typically provide no food source for native insects and animals. This is apparent because you typically find no leaf damage on these plants. Simple said, our native insects and animals do not eat these plants! The consequence of more alien plants is less native insects and animals. Remember, native plants and native herbivores have spent a very long time building their interdependent relationship.

When alien plants take over a habitat, there are less native insects and animals in that region. You know what that means to the birds we all love to watch that migrate to our landscapes in the spring. Birds eat berries, plants, and insects. However, when it comes to feeding their young, approximately 96 percent of bird species only consume insects as hatchlings. If the number of native insects is in decline, so to will be the number of young birds that depend on these insects.

Next is the issue of biodiversity. When I talk about native insects eating native plants, do realize that not every native insect eats every native plant it comes upon. Through time, native insects have become specialists when it comes to plants. In other words, certain insects look for certain plants to eat.

By having more divesity of native plants in our gardens, that enhances the number of insects that can be found nourishing themselves when they visit. Having large numbers of different insects provides more choices for parent birds to select from.

And although I am showing the connection that exists between native plants, native insects, and birds, there is much more to the story. Native plants also bring pollinators, mammals, and reptiles back to our areas. When common milkweed is planted, Monarch butterflies are sure to visit.

In summary, think about a landscape with native plants as a habitat that is alive and well. With this thought in mind, Michele and I are currently planning on replacing a section of lawn in our backyard and expanding our native garden.

I hope you read Mr. Tallamy’s book and become energized to create your own garden with native plants. Do know that the birds you love to see will applaud your efforts and return to the area year after year?

And lastly, visit audubon.org/native-plants to better understand which native plants will attract which birds. Wildflower.org is another good web site where you can obtain information about native plants.

Written by: Greg Petrosky

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