

“I want to know my landscape is thriving”

Favoring native plants on lots of all sizes

BY GUS STEEVES
CORRESPONDENT

BRIMFIELD — Dan Jaffe-Wilder is a huge advocate of helping land go wild. Whether it's a garden, an acre, the 19 acres he recently bought in Brimfield, or the 8,000 acres he helps manage for Norcross Wildlife Sanctuary in Wales, the difference is often in approach, not objective.

A garden, he notes, is easy to manage; an acre is barely possible, and “the big places” are well beyond that.

“Even a lazy gardener is doing a whole lot more than we can do on 8000 acres at Norcross,” he told a few dozen conservation commissioners during an online Mass Association of Conservation Commissioners “Lunch and Learn” talk last week.

“In some cases, the management is next to nothing, or is nothing.” It can be as simple as clearing a space around an uncommon plant or tree to give it a better chance against very common ones; on his land, for example, he's trying to promote wild blueberry in thickets of laurel and shagbark hickory in copses of black birch. (It's not coincidental the promoted plants are edible.)

“I want to know my landscape is thriving,” he said, noting he favors “plants that are bringing in habitat and feeding us,” as well as other species.

The key is working with what's there, not trying to force it into something it's not. Where possible, Wilder recommends starting with a soil test; it's “one of the best things you could possibly do” to avoid planting failures, but he suggests ignoring the amendment recommendations such tests usually provide. Instead, select plants that thrive in that kinds of soil.

Case in point – thin soil, which is common around here. He dubs that “your friend” because “things grow more slowly in thin soil,” including the invasives and weeds. Native plants have adapted to such soil and will outcompete the weeds; some natives, such as goldenrod and bee balm, are also very important habitat plants for a large number of insects and birds.

When promoting natives in such areas, Wilder encourages planting them in blocks, with many of a few species together, because “we don't have time to do the whole meadow.” To help them along, Norcross mows a third of the meadow each spring,

although their goal is to eventually be able to have a controlled burn every five to eight years.

You can't do that with a rich-soiled, moist meadow; such places have a lot more nutrients and plants of all kinds (welcome or not) grow faster. Invasives tend to get started before the natives there, as they seep in by air and water; controlling them and “pushy” natives requires fall mowing and some brushcutting. For Wilder, the goal there is to favor uncommon natives while keeping other species “in amounts that are happy and thriving.” In one field at Norcross, they found 12 gentians two years ago and have since increased that to 125. If you can establish “thick, healthy patches of native species,” invasive seeds won't have soil in which to root, he observed.

For really big places, Wilder's goal is to “look at the larger picture,” to see what kinds of habitat the region as a whole needs. One that's uncommon in southern New England is what's termed “early successional” meadow and woodland. Many in our area know what that looks like: the strip of “tornado alley” from West Springfield to Southbridge, where bushes and young trees are now taking over from the mature ones the tornado of 2011 wiped out.

Although dangerous to hikers, the tangled masses of downed trees in that strip are ideal, even necessary, habitat for some species. Wilder urges people to maintain smaller examples of such woodpiles on their land.

Creating the earlier, meadow stage can take some work. Wilder said Norcross removed all the trees in a few selected sites and mowed the grasses very low to give “native annuals and short-lived perennials” a chance to get started. Such succession takes years. In three or four, the first species “get out competed,” and long-lived perennials like goldenrod start to take over. Eventually, those give way to low bushes, then trees of various species.

At the end, Wilder took a few questions. One sought suggestions for challenging the common attitude that favors well-mowed “postage stamp” lawns.

Often, he said, people do favor habitat; they just need education. One way to do that can be to put up signs indicating the parcel is habitat, while mowing paths to show it's “a purposeful thing,” he said.

“Leading by example is so important,” he added, noting people need to “see value in this kind of landscape.”

Similarly, ecology advocates can plant native wildflowers in visible public places with signs saying why they matter.

Regarding another question, Wilder noted they sometimes have to use herbicides to control inva-

sives. One effective organic type on plants (but not roots) is horticultural vinegar, but he said that's very caustic, requiring safety gear and a pesticide license to use. It's far stronger than household vinegar, at 30 percent acid vs 5 percent, but has no long-term ecological impact.

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Bay Path LPN named member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society

WORCESTER — In a recent announcement, Kiana McDonald, LPN of Worcester (formerly of Southbridge) joined the esteemed Phi Theta Kappa. The recognition included a membership packet containing a certificate, pin, and other benefits. Membership to Phi Theta Kappa allows McDonald to build job skills, challenging academic programs, scholarships, transfer support, and more. The mission of Phi Theta Kappa is to recognize academic achievement of college students and to provide opportunities for them to grow as scholars and leaders.

In a message to McDonald, Dr. Lynn Tincher-Ladner, President and CEO of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society stated, “congratulations on the accomplishments that brought you here. I look forward to seeing where Phi Theta Kappa takes you next.”

McDonald is working on academic progression towards her Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree at Quinsigamond Community College where she has been named in the dean's list due to her excellent academic performance. McDonald is a 2013 Bay Path Regional Vocational Technical High School graduate. She is an alumna of Bay Path RVTHS Practical Nursing Academy, class of 2017 where



Courtesy

Kiana McDonald

she was inducted into the National Technical Honor Society. She is a State Bronze Medalist and District Gold Medalist for SkillsUSA both for Medical Terminology. She was a recipient of \$500 Bay Path RVTHS Health Occupations Graduate Award and was an officer of the UNICEF Club. McDonald is Mental Health First Aid Certified. After her role as a charge nurse at the Webster Manor Rehabilitation and Health Care Center from 2017-2020, McDonald is currently with Maxim Healthcare as a staff nurse.

Gateway Players present “Bring Your Own Improv”

SOUTHBRIDGE — Gateway Players Theatre is back, bringing you live entertainment! We are proud to present “Bring Your Own Improv,” an interactive Improv show that welcomes voluntary audience participation. BYOI was voted “Best Comedy Show in Rhode Island!” Live on the Southbridge Town

Common, 1 Mechanic St., Southbridge, on Saturday, Aug. 28 at 6 p.m. Free admission, 50/50 Raffle, and Refreshments. In the event of rain, the performance will be held at Elm Street Congregational Church.

Web site: <http://www.gatewayplayers.org/>.



Join the conversation!

The Sturbridge Agricultural and Equestrian Center will be a state of the art, green complex with a thoroughbred racetrack, farming programs, recreational facilities and community amenities.

Public Open House

Monday, August 23 from 5:30pm - 7pm
The Publick House Historic Inn, 277 Main Street

Learn about the proposed project and meet the team.
Light refreshments will be served.

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