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Helping landscapes go native

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By Toni Price Correspondent

Did you know that many gardening techniques can actually be harmful to the environment? Our outdated English cottage garden concepts featuring lush, green lawns support almost no beneficial creatures, and worse, the usual high chemical input and water use for their maintenance are often extremely harmful.

One solution to this increasingly difficult environmental conundrum is to plant native plants. What constitutes a native plant can be debated, but generally the definition is a plant that grew in the United States in pre-Colonial days.

Plants that were introduced here are referred to as "exotics" or "aliens." There are many benefits to including natives in the landscape. These are the plants that have developed in place with all of the other surrounding living things and have survived. They are well adapted to adverse conditions and usually require significantly less water, fertilizer and overall care, which equates to lower costs.

But more important, these plants support beneficial insects and many forms of wildlife that contribute to human existence, while creating a healthy ecosystem. Their natural beauty may also surprise you.

The easiest way to transition to natives is to replace lawn sections with ground covers and shrubs. Before selecting any plants, be sure to familiarize yourself with the required soil, light and water conditions, as well as other growth factors, like plant height and color.

Some options for native ground covers might include partridgeberry, blue-eyed grass, bunchberry and wintergreen. Some shrub choices could be Virginia sweetspire, coralberry, clethra, or one of the many beautiful viburnums. Each site requires unique plants, but the fun lies in selecting them.

If your favorite nurseries don't carry New Jersey natives, request them. Also, make sure the plants are New Jersey natives and not U.S. natives. The closer plant location of origin is to your location, the better. Check your local library for many informative books about native plants as well as Internet sources.

In Burlington County, one of the best local sources of information about native plants is the Rancocas Nature Center chapter of the Native Plant Society of New Jersey. This group meets monthly at the center and has created an informative video and program, "The Importance of Native Plants in the Landscape."

It provides educational information for municipal groups and planners, landscapers, homeowners, and anyone interested in helping to maintain a balanced ecosystem, and is available for presentation by the group. For more information, contact the chapter at rancocas@npsnj.org.

Toni Price is a beekeeper, lavender and herb farmer, and Master Gardener Educator. She is the founding president of the Rancocas Nature Center chapter of the Native Plant Society of New Jersey. Homeowners with lawn or garden questions can contact the Rutgers Master Gardeners at 609-265-5050 or at burlingtonmg@njaes.rutgers.edu.