



## TransGarden

My wife Marcia and I moved to Port Norris in 1990, almost thirty years ago. We had been married for a couple of years and were also two years into our professions, as elementary school teachers. Moving from an apartment in Queens Village in South Philly, I was excited to finally have a large enough lot with which to indulge a long-thwarted passion: gardening.

Our High Street property was devoid of anything with redeeming garden value; what lay

before me was almost literally a blank slate. My vision of a garden reflected what we had seen at several Philadelphia Flower Shows, and as a result I rushed to fill borders with flowering bulbs and showy shrubs without any thought about appropriateness other than checking the hardiness zone. I also wanted my garden "yesterday," so I sought out fast growers that would expand into the vacuum and give me a garden in the snap of a finger.

Years passed and plants came and went. I eagerly perused the offerings featured in gardening magazines, including all the latest cultivars and the newest and trendiest offerings from Asia. This approach lasted for two decades - squandering money and getting less and less satisfaction. Our garden was pretty but something was missing, and most of the plants I installed over those years died in a season or two - sometimes even sooner. Something needed to change! I began to awaken to the possibility of creating something

more lasting and more authentic. Of course I was aware of native gardening; my best friends only planted natives in their yard; I admired their puritanical commitment but stubbornly clung to my old "Flower Show" ways.

However, when I started hearing about the work of Doug Tallamy, my entire gardening ethos started to shift. To be sure I had certainly been moving towards a more "Bringing Nature Home" approach, but reading his work, watching his videos, and finally having the opportunity to meet and speak with him changed my outlook profoundly. As a result I looked at my garden and I wanted to rip most of it out, but I couldn't actually bring myself to do it. That is why I now view my yard as a "TransGarden:" I mean that the garden still possesses major nonnative elements, to be gradually phased out and transitioned toward a focus on native trees, shrubs, and herbaceous perennials that are known to sustain wildlife. It's a

work in progress, but what garden isn't?

My understanding of Tallamy's work is that with the widespread and profound destruction of native habitats in our region, and on the planet as a whole, it is incumbent upon each of us to try to replicate remnants of these native habitats in our backyards and gardens. This means we must seek out plant species that have evolved with the fauna - especially insects - which depend upon them. As a passionate birder I have come to realize that it is not enough to maintain bird feeders, but it is imperative to provide forage for the caterpillars and other bugs that our avian friends require to feed their young and to fuel their intercontinental migrations.

As my nonnative trees die off they are being replaced by other more beneficial species. I've permitted a volunteer hackberry tree to push an ailing Japanese cherry tree, which I always loved, over the brink. I believe this is

why, every summer, I now regularly see both "Emperor" butterfly species which use hackberry as a host plant. In my streetside strip I replaced the hybrid purple leaf plum trees with red oak, wild black cherry and eastern red cedar. Each of these genera supports an incredible number of Lepidoptera species. Tallamy writes in "Bringing Nature Home" that oaks can host in excess of 530 species and native cherries close to 460 species of butterflies and moths in our region. I've also girdled two fairly sizable trees on my lot, an ailanthus and a Bradford pear, neither of which attracted much of anything to the yard. They are safely away from the house, so I will leave them standing for the woodpeckers and for perches.

Pollinators have certainly become a hot topic over the past decade, with the precipitous declines in various bee and other such species. Providing nectar-rich flowers attracts numerous types of butterflies and moths as well as hummingbirds to the

garden, from spring through the fall. Once I've set the table for them, they will have the native trees and shrubs on which to lay eggs and produce the caterpillars our birds need to provide for their young.

To conclude, I can say without reservation that I have witnessed a significant increase in the number of bird and lepidopteran species now utilizing my garden, and the beauty that I experience there brings me great pleasure and appreciation. The way to begin the transition is to be incremental, and pay heed to the plants that are getting the attention of insects and birds out in the field. Let nature be your guide and remember that we can all save the planet together, bit by bit, on our own pieces of ground.