



Turning a New Leaf Conference
Shepherdstown, West Virginia
November 16, 2013

Closing Plenary: Native Plants in Your Garden: Lessons from Nature and Culture
C. Colston Burrell, Garden Designer, Author, Free Union, VA

Mr. Burrell examined the issues surrounding landscaping using native plants. These are the highlights of his analysis and conclusions.

Background - analysis of issues surrounding use of native plants. Mr. Burrell examined how he would apply the SITES initiative to his work and teachings. These were the results of his reflections on the subject.

- minimize soil disturbance
- preserve site vegetation
- use native plants

- What is a native plant? Native plants serve different roles in the landscape/ecosystem depending on your point of view.
- Some definitions:
 - 1.1. part of a community
 - 1.2. a food plant
 - 1.3. beauty is part of the discussion, but it's not enough to just be beautiful - the plant must be "productive" in the sense that it serves a purpose within the ecological environment
 - 1.4. critical component to restoration
 - 1.5. varies geographically
 - 1.6. relationship to beauty of space
 - 1.7. relationship to insects as host plant
- We throw about the word "native" easily, like "organic," but there are a lot of implications. For example, is double-flowered trillium native? What about other alternate forms found in the wild?
- Other definitions:
 - 1.8. Federal Native Plant Committee
 - 1.9. Wikipedia
 - 1.10. SITES

- Conclusions: Think globally, act locally. Focus on the ecology - use plants that are productive in terms of contributing to the complex food web.

Landscaping Goals - forming a plan of action.

- With the above background in mind, we should garden within a framework of plant communities and their succession - the cumulative, directional, partly predictable change in plant communities over time.
- We should think of plants as part of a plant community, not as individual specimens.
- Succession dynamics
 - 1.1.11. communities gain diversity over time



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- 1.1.12. late in their lifecycle they get more homogeneous, for example when large trees reach canopy level
- 1.1.13. once that happens it takes a major disturbance (such as a storm or flood) to change things and “reset”
- 1.1.14. in our own gardens, even the small action of pulling weeds is a disturbance and acts as a reset that starts a new cycle
- Think habitat
 - 1.1.15. Habitat for what? What are we trying to create?
- Think diversity
 - 1.1.16. A simple landscape may have a pest problem that can be solved by planting a more complex landscape that supports predators (insects, birds).
 - 1.1.17. A situation might be improved, for example, by planting herbaceous plants around Azaleas to eliminate lace bug problems. The native herbaceous plants provide support for predator insect populations.
- Think about whether a plant is considered invasive, whether it is prone to deer browsing - factors contributing to its survival rate in the community.

Plan of action - design the landscape

- With all the above as background, design as nature would - canopy, understory, ground plane.
- We can add more plantings to “frame nature”, that is, frame views of existing plant communities instead of eradicating and replacing them.
- Think about what is possible with native plants - set realistic goals
 - provide nectar sources
 - provide food for larvae
 - provide cover vegetation
- How to create a successful plant community:
 - plant to establish a continuous line of plant communities (plantings on either side of property boundary can flow into one another so wildlife has a continuous corridor)
 - layer planting as in nature
 - use productive plants
 - reduce pesticide use

Conclusion:

- **DO NO HARM.** This was Mr. Burrell’s main message, meaning our first landscaping goal should be that we do not disrupt established plant communities.
- As humans, we need to look at the world as if we are part of the plant and wildlife community.