Embrace wildflowers and natives for garden success
by
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In 1956, we came to Brevard and found a little house on Laurel Lane.

It needed work. The yard needed work. There were patches of grass here and there and the previous owner had planted a row of small hemlock trees on the east side, planning to make a hedge.

For a while, we mowed, fertilized, and weeded. There was English ivy growing below the little hemlocks and I tried to weed it out but never really succeeded.

One day a fern came to grow in the ivy. I weeded around the fern and said a thank you prayer to Mother Nature.

We planted more hemlocks, trying to create a private spot.

Every spring, I bought annuals and perennials and placed them here and there, haphazardly. More ferns came, and cardinal flowers sprouted next to a walk.

A neighbor gave me a bag of liriope, which, to my later chagrin, I planted. Richard Fry from Fry’s Nursery came and considered my back lawn, which refused to grow. He recommended Ajuga reptans (bugle weed) which I planted. I planted cotoneaster and wintercreeper.

There was English ivy toward the back fence, which I periodically battled, tearing it out but never winning. (I’m not sure I really wanted to. I didn’t know then how invasive it is).

I planted a burning bush. Through the years, it reproduced very actively. (I later discovered how invasive the burning bushes were in the forest).

On the west side of the yard, we planted a row of two-foot tall Nellie Stevens hollies. They grew to 20 feet (or more) and then came down with a scale infection. All of the hollies in the
neighborhood caught this scale. We struggled to save the hollies but they became so bedraggled and sparse that we were forced to remove them all. The arborist ground the stumps of the hollies on the west, but just cut down all the others. Those cut hollies came back and are now looking quite healthy.

Years passed. There was no more lawn. There was lirope, ajuga, vinca, ivy, pachysandra, cotoneaster, wintercreeper, ground ivy, buttercups . . . and there were many ferns. Most arrived on the wind. Some I bought, figuring they would do well as ferns seemed to like it here.

I bought and planted daylilies, sedum, hosta, black-eyed Susan, goldenrod, and beebalm. (Our lot, including the house area, is ¼ of an acre).

We built walks and put in stepping stones.

Early on, we had planted azaleas and rhododendrons. Most survived.

About ten years after we came to Brevard, the wooly adelgid arrived on the scene, and we again had the arborist come to remove the hemlocks. We kept some of them, which had grown pretty big by then. We replaced some of the hemlocks with Leyland cypresses, which were touted at the time as perfect substitutions for hemlocks. (We just had four big Leylands removed, three doubles that were too close to the house. We knew no better than to let them become doubles when they were small). We are treating the remaining hemlocks and they are not too bad.

In 55 years of gardening in Transylvania County, what have I learned?

1. Don’t plant a monoculture.
2. Start with a landscape plan.
3. Grow native plants.
4. Don’t plant invasives.
5. Nurture all wildings and identify every weed before it is uprooted. Many of the “weeds” are wildflowers.
6. Treasure and nurture the mosses that grow on your infertile, acid, shady, bare ground. They are beautiful and they will come if you make them welcome.
7. Treasure the ferns that arrive on the wind.
9. Love your garden even if it isn’t neat and perfect.

Do you have a question for the Transylvania Extension Master Gardeners or a subject you’d like to see addressed in this column? E-mail us at bbelli05@aol.com. Our garden clinic is closed for the winter, but it is open on Wednesdays, March through October.

Garden Box for late February:

- Prune butterfly bushes to control height and shape.
- Fertilize large shade trees with 3 lbs. of 10-10-10 per inch of trunk diameter.
- Fertilize spring flowering bulbs as soon as leaves appear.
- Plant fruit trees, blueberry bushes, blackberries, and grape vines.
- Prune grape vines after severe cold has passed and before they leaf out.
- Prune fruit trees.
- Apply dormant oil spray on fruit trees and ornamentals.
- Plant asparagus crowns.