

Taming the Wild & SUPPORTING WILDLIFE

by LISSA MORRISON, Vice President, Wild Ones, Ozark Chapter Board



Well tended and mulched Native Garden at the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks.

In the last few years there has been a tremendous increase of interest in using native plants in our urban landscapes. Almost twenty years ago, I first began experimenting with what I call “Well Behaved Natives.” The concept was unheard of. Today it is clear that many of us realize how urgently we need to change our gardening habits to create healthy ecosystems.

Recently there has been much written about leaving our gardens messier, about not cutting stems back or shredding and blowing leaves. The science behind these articles says that cleaning up too much destroys the places where our native wildlife can find food, or make nests, or overwinter. I agree with this research 100 percent.

My personal gardening style is what I would call natural and messy. However, as a professional I have encountered quite a bit of blowback to the messy look, especially in public spaces or even in subdivisions. Many who understand the science still aren’t quite ready to yield to “leave it messy for the critters.” Invariably, the front yard wildlife habitat will get complaints from the neighbors. Is it possible to have our native gardens look a little more intentional and manicured? Is it possible to “tame the wild” and support a healthy habitat?



I would like to offer 10 suggestions to help native landscapes appear more intentional and tidier... and still support a healthy environment:

-  Use whole leaves for mulch. If they tend to blow away, sprinkle a small amount of purchased shredded natural mulch on top to hold the leaves in place. Burning or shredding leaves kills beneficial insects.
-  Shape and prune native trees, shrubs, and vines – using the same techniques that apply to non-natives. This will enhance the well behaved intentional look.
-  When a native perennial flower is spent and unattractive, cut the old growth foliage back to between 10" and 18". Research has shown that insects use the stem below 18" for laying eggs or over wintering.
-  If the foliage on a perennial has powdery mildew, cut it back to the basal foliage near the ground as soon as it is finished blooming. Do not put diseased or fungal debris in your compost pile.
-  Use the dried seed heads that have been cut off to make dried arrangements in your garden for the birds. Place in a heavy planter or weigh the container down so that it stays upright. Or tie upright dried bundles along a fence. The birds will still eat the seeds.
-  Give the late summer and fall blooming perennials a spring haircut in May. Native perennials that bloom mid-summer to frost will be shorter, denser, sturdier, and not so floppy. They will still bloom.
-  In the fall cut back the old dead growth of perennials to 12" to 18". Insects that use pithy stems for over-wintering, need a point of entry. We are helping them by cutting back some of the messiness.
-  Make use of some of the sticks and debris as you clean up. Tie bundles of sticks on a post or fence to create a "bee hotel." Make debris piles around the base of trees or in a backyard corner. Debris is used by many critters for winter homes and nesting.
-  Leave some bare dirt free of mulch or weeds for the native ground-nesting solitary bees. If you see small holes in the dirt, you are supporting wildlife.
-  Basic maintenance is required to have attractive native gardens. The reward will be beautiful habitats that support the living creatures we love.



I am thrilled that so many of us are ready to support our natural flora and fauna. This is new territory and a steep learning curve for many of us. With a little patience and practice, it is possible to tame the wild and support a healthy habitat at the same time.



About the Author

Lissa Morrison, chapter vice president, has been in the horticulture industry for 35+ years. She has owned a wholesale plant nursery, a residential landscaping business, and a retail garden center. Lissa was on the horticulture staff at the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks for eight years. She created this as an educational tool for people unaware of the benefits of native gardening and shares it with various organizations.

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