

Gardening's new ethos: Help the planet (and look good too)

March 31 2015, by Katherine Roth



This photo provided by Timber Press shows perennials and native vegetation in the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. This May garden view looks northward to a south-facing edge comprised of a proven site-adapted mix of native and non-native vegetation. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Rick Darke)

From the biggest botanical gardens to the smallest backyard plots and terraces, there's a movement underway to make gardens work harder for

the environment.

"It's no longer enough for a garden to just look pretty. Every garden needs to do more and every garden matters," said Douglas Tallamy, a professor in the department of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware.

Because of global warming and habitat destruction, he said, "today, gardens need to support life, sequester carbon, feed pollinators and manage water. It's a lot to ask, but it doesn't have to look messy and it may be the key to our survival."

For many people who aren't sure what they can do about [climate change](#), home gardens provide an opportunity to make a palpable difference.

That sense of purpose is creating a change in garden aesthetics, with a more natural look and more emphasis on drought-tolerant and wildlife-friendly plants.

"It's one of the few things an individual can do to mitigate climate change. The cumulative impact on the environment is huge, plus it's easy, affordable and fun," said Ann Savageau, who ripped out most of her lawn in drought-parched Davis, California, a year ago and replanted with desert grasses and other [native plants](#).

"The increase we've seen in pollinators, butterflies and birds at our house is really exciting, and we reduced our water usage by two thirds," she said.

Whereas there used to be enough land for wildlife and humans to exist separately, it's become essential that we share habitats, Tallamy and Rick Darke argue in their book, "The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden" (Timber Press, 2014).

"Unless we share our space with nature, the plants on which bees, caterpillars, butterflies, birds and other wildlife depend will not survive," Tallamy said.

Earth-friendly gardens consist mostly of native species, on which local wildlife depends, experts say.

"Gardening for wildlife, especially birds, is really the hot thing now in horticulture and gardening. The trend is toward naturalistic garden design, with native plants. It's a High Line kind of a look," said Kristin Schleiter, associate vice president for outdoor gardens and senior curator at the New York Botanical Garden.

The High Line, the New York City park and garden which runs along a strip of old elevated track, "does symbolize a newer aesthetic in purposeful, naturalized gardening," said Tom Smarr, its director of horticulture.



This photo provided by Timber Press shows a bluebird in the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. The great gray dart in the beak of this bluebird feeds on birch trees and blueberry bushes. Insects that eat plants are essential components of nearly all terrestrial food webs. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Doug Tallamy)

About half the plants are natives and the other half are self-seeded species, which require relatively little maintenance and water. "There's way more forgiveness and durability about it," he said.

"A lot of people have totally been inspired by the wild look and have

tried it on their own at home," Smarr said.

A few specific ways that home gardeners can go easy on the planet:

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PLANT AN OAK TREE

Oaks sequester lots of carbon, have enormous root systems that help manage water and, according to Tallamy and Darke, are fantastic at supporting wildlife. "There are 557 species of caterpillars in the Mid-Atlantic states, and they're all bird food. The birds eat all the caterpillars to support their young, so you don't need to worry about defoliation."

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FEED THE POLLINATORS

Tallamy warns that without pollinators, 80 percent to 90 percent of all plants would be lost, and that gardeners should focus on plants that feed the estimated 4,000 species of native bees. Pollinator-friendly gardens feature a sequence of native flowering plants, so that from April through September something's always blooming. Mountain mint, sunflowers, native holly, sweet pepper bush and goldenrod are all great for [pollinators](#), Tallamy said. Further west, blazing star and milkweed are good choices. Schleiter said that early spring can be especially tough for bees. For early bloomers, she recommends Lyndera, a native bush with great fall color, and also dogwood.



This photo provided by Timber Press shows a butterfly and bee pollinating a flower in the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. Rather than being redundant, a diversity of pollinators creates stability in vital pollinator communities. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Doug Tallamy)

**MINIMIZE LAWN, CONCRETE AND NON-NATIVE
ORNAMENTAL SPECIES**

"Around 92 percent of our suburban lots are lawn, and that's the worst you can do," Tallamy said, adding that concrete seems to be our "default landscaping" and ornamental Asian plant varieties have little to offer native wildlife.

"In the typical American yard, 80 percent of the plants are from China. That's not a functioning eco-system," he said.

Even apartment dwellers can help, by planting [native species](#) on roofs and terraces.



This photo provided by Timber Press shows a caterpillar feeding on swallowtail eggs on a pipevine in the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by Rick

Darke and Doug Tallamy. After pipevine swallowtails mate in spring, adult females lay their eggs on the undersides of pipevine leaves or stems. The eggs hatch within a few weeks and the young caterpillars begin feeding on leaves and stems. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Doug Tallamy)

Schleiter said: "Really think about the amount of chemical that's put on our lawns. If you're not using all of your lawn, just let the grass grow out and maybe put in some native perennials. It all adds up."



In this July 6, 2013 file photo, visitors to the High Line walk past the greenery on a hot summer day in New York. The High Line, the New York City park and garden which runs along a strip of old elevated track, "does symbolize a newer aesthetic in purposeful, naturalized gardening," said Tom Smarr, its director of

horticulture. About half the plants are natives and the other half are self-seeded species, which require relatively little maintenance and water. "There's way more forgiveness and durability about it," he said. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, File)

AVOID PESTICIDES

"If you're planting a garden for bees and butterflies, don't use pesticides that will kill bees and butterflies," warned Schleiter. "It sounds obvious, but people do it all the time. You have to be extra sure that when you buy a plant at the nursery, it hasn't been sprayed with any pesticides. Nurseries do it a lot and you need to be extremely careful."



In this May 30, 2012 file photo, people walk on New York's High Line. The High Line, the New York City park and garden which runs along a strip of old elevated track, "does symbolize a newer aesthetic in purposeful, naturalized gardening," said Tom Smarr, its director of horticulture. About half the plants are natives and the other half are self-seeded species, which require relatively

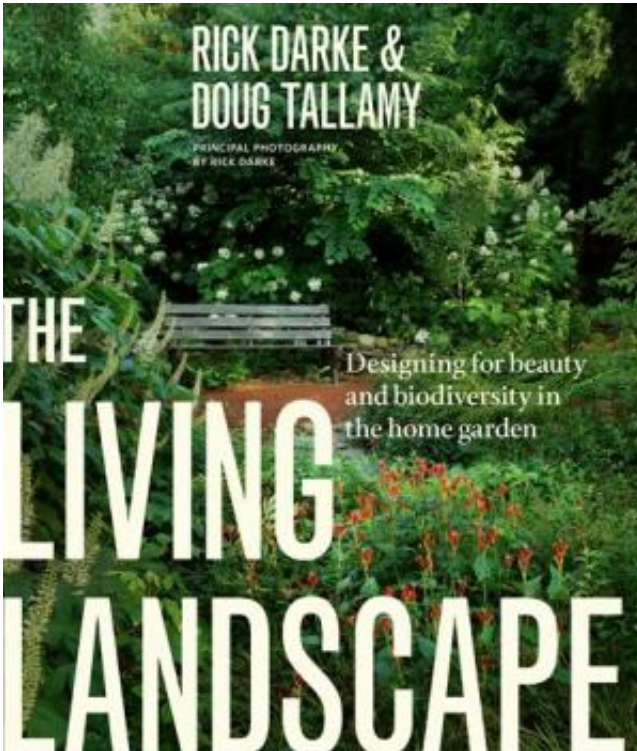
little maintenance and water. "There's way more forgiveness and durability about it," he said. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)



This photo provided by Timber Press shows a mature oak in a residential garden in the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. A mature oak in a residential garden provides ecosystem services necessary to human health and also provides cover, shelter, and sustenance for a wide variety of local and migratory wildlife. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Rick Darke)



This late October photo provided by Timber Press shows a view into a canopy of white oaks (*Quercus alba*) backed by shagbark hickories (*Carya ovata*) in a Penn. garden from the book, "The Living Landscape," (Timber Press) by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. (AP Photo/Timber Press, Rick Darke)



This photo provided by Timber Press shows the cover of the book, "The Living Landscape," by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy. Whereas there used to be enough land for wildlife and humans to exist separately, it's become essential that we share habitats, Tallamy and Rick Darke argue in their book, "The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden" (Timber Press, 2014). (AP Photo/Timber Press, Rick Darke & Doug Tallamy)

More information: www.bringingnaturehome.net
arboretum.ucdavis.edu/arboretum_all_stars.aspx

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