

Time Now...

TO GROW NATIVE

We are not the owners—but the caretakers; therefore, it is ours to love and preserve or abuse and destroy.

“This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already [totally destroyed] many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these ‘resources,’ but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

*“In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for ... fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”*

Although these words apply to 2010, Aldo Leopold in 1948 defined a *land ethic* in his book *A Sand County Almanac*. In many ways, he echoes the earlier attitude of Native American tribes who see human beings as only one small part of the creation that is Mother Earth—a part of the whole not

a conqueror. When and why did attitudes change?

Today, transmission lines, highways, infrastructure expansions, reservoirs and people devour land as though it were ice cream to be consumed before it melts. In the process, meadowlands, pastures and forests with their diversity of native grasses, shrubs, trees, vines and flowers are destroyed—some gone forever. According to Belinda McCoy McLaughlin, past state president of the Native Plant Society of Texas and native plant enthusiast, four species of Texas Native Plants risk extinction every day. With predictions like 46 million people in Texas by 2060, the future of Texas Native Plants appears endangered.

Evolutionary biologists, ecologists, historians—scientists of many disciplines agree with George Amato, Director and Affiliated Professor, Sackler Institute of Comparative Genomics/ American Museum of Natural History. Amato points out that 46 percent of the world’s terrestrial space is considered “wild spaces.” Therefore, humankind has little time and must find ways to combine the demands of contemporary suburban and urban environments with the biodiversity of these “wild spaces.” “Human activity, such as farming, ranching, urban development, and chemical application, has significantly reduced many of the Earth’s plant communities,” explains authorities at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. “The loss of these plant communities has led to species loss and endangered natural

habitats, caused soil erosion, and reduced the genetic diversity necessary for stable, balanced ecosystems.” Destruction of the planet can only lead to destruction of ourselves. On an Earth Day poster in 1970, Walt Kelly’s Pogo declared...“We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us.”

So what can “US” do to reclaim and maintain the biodiversity of this planet? Well, a good place to start is in our own landscaping plans—with native plants. According to McLaughlin, “For all practical purposes, a native plant is a plant that was present in (its) geographical area when European settlement occurred.” Since record-keeping began, approximately 5000 species of native plants have been identified in Texas, and about 2500 of those can be found in East Texas. What a bounty from which to choose.

Texas Native Plants include grasses, flowers, shrubs, trees and vines in myriad shapes and colors, textures and scents. The majority of native plants clearly define their spaces in the landscape and tend to occupy just those spaces more cooperatively than some of their naturalized counterparts. A good example is coral honeysuckle, a Texas Native Plant, identified by its distinctive bright red trumpet flowers which appear during the early days of January and last throughout the year. Hummingbirds enjoy its succulent blooms, while other birds come for the fruit. Most importantly, coral honeysuckle stays put unlike its invasive Japanese counterpart.

Reason enough for it to be saluted by NICE (Natives Instead of the Common Exotics) as its Plant of the Month for March 2010.

After considering Belinda McLaughlin's ten reasons to "Grow Native," any other course of action seems almost foolhardy. **Texas Native Plants...**

1. **...Save water** - drought tolerance is essential in a Texas where water is rapidly becoming the most precious and expensive of Texas' resources
2. **...Prove hardier** - for centuries they have survived Texas weather, land use and amateur gardeners
3. **...Limit use of poisons** - pesticides and herbicides – need none of the 70 million pounds of these chemicals added to Texas' soil base annually
4. **...Limit fertilizers** - seldom requiring any of the 6 billion pounds used annually
5. **...Require little maintenance** - chiefly perennials that provide pleasure each blooming cycle with limited gardening efforts
6. **...Save money** - one time inexpensive purchases at native plant sales or nurseries; often shared by enthusiastic gardeners at no cost; transplanted from legal areas.
7. **...Provide wild-life habitats** - native perennials furnish habitat for the state's 400 butterflies including monarchs, the state insect as well as its 700 birds
8. **...Preserve regional identity** - illustrating the unique qualities of Texas' 10 vegetational zones
9. **...Protect native plant diversity** - the biodiversity that makes our state and planet healthy
10. **...Add variety to landscapes** - in Texas over 5,000 Native Plant species from which to choose.

Background is always useful for understanding, but to truly appreciate the impact of Texas Native Plants—sharing a garden with its gardener is essential. Fortunately, in Texarkana/Bowie and Linden/Cass Counties a number of these gardeners and gardens grow. Their questions and accomplishments are guided by the Native Plant Society of Texas. Headquartered in Fredericksburg, the Native Plant Society of Texas seeks to preserve native plants and habitats, protect and restore threatened plants, and educate. The non-profit organization is run by volunteers through 32 chapters around the state. Linden/Cass County gardeners meet with the Caddo Wildflower group while Texarkana/Bowie Country residents participate in the Four Corners Chapter. Both groups welcome the curious and dedicated to their lively meetings, which may include slide presentations along with lots of referring to books and experienced gardeners. Discussions can dart from winter sowing to Rough Cut Buttercups to proper terminology: *Dirt* is what you scrape off the bottom of your shoes before you come into the house; *soil* is what you plant in - shared wisdom from an SFA Professor. Club members also participate in relevant field trips. Surprises and guests are welcomed.

One member of the Four Corners Chapter, whose enthusiasm for her garden borders on passion, is New Boston resident Mary Miller, a certified Texas Master Gardener. Should she ever find the time to spend in San Antonio, she could easily earn her Native Landscape Certification.

Mary's garden encompasses 1 1/2 acres, since she is now cultivating both her own yard and the yard formerly her mother's. Mary was born and reared on her family's farm north of Hooks, but she left East Texas for Austin and Houston. Thirty-five years later she returns to East Texas to help her aging mother and, literally returns to her roots. Although gardening is just one of many interests Mary pursues, her enthusiasm for her plants affects anyone who enters her special space—and she welcomes guests. "I really enjoy sharing," Mary admits. "I don't charge people. I'm just glad they're interested and want to see 'em. Some of my plants I don't share, and I just tell 'em [her visitors] I don't share."

Mary's lot is deep and shaded by huge Pecan, Sycamore, and Elm trees. Her towering Catalpa (Catawba) tree is currently covered with large white blossoms, which are preliminary to arrival of the famous Catawba worms. Mary sighs as she explains, "I know



when the worms are there because you can hear 'em when they fall. I'll just look out, and there will be men all over the place gathering the worms. The fish love 'em. The fishermen put the worms in corn meal and put 'em in their freezers to use when they go fishin'. This tree has even been measured by Texas A & M for some kind of record, but somethin' about it's too tall for its girth." Nonetheless, the tree towers over both her front and back yards—a size unusual even for this non-native Texas resident. She even has some Chinese tallow trees, considered by many to be one of those invasive naturalized plants.

The Catalpa tree joins her others to assure that any sunlight her chiefly Texas Native Plants receive is dappled, yet they thrive in their shaded haven and require only occasional watering. Her flower beds, filled with rich composted soil from her own compost pile, are arranged in ovals, circles, some rectangular. Lately she has added a fish pond—created out of her grandchild's retired plastic swimming pool and devised her own plant-filled bog. She has even shared her creative successes with local gardening groups. (One thing quickly evident is that these gardening folks are always sharing and learning even though the knowledge they possess already about plants can be called *encyclopedic*.)

As she strolls

through her shaded spaces bordered by a variety of weathered outbuildings, Mary gathers sticks or pinches dead leaves or stands with her hands on her hips—usually a sign of frustration. She stops at a round spot near the edge of her garden's trellis and stares at an abundant collection of tall, spiky muted green plants—some with beautiful pink blooms. "That's 'bout the only thing good you can say about 'em." Mary observes. "These are obedient plants," Judy Klimaszewski, a companion gardener-guide adds, "They're not called obedient plants because they're well behaved," and they both laugh as Judy grasps the top of a plant, bends its long stem toward the ground and hopes that it will stay in that position. The plant "obeys" at least as long as it's visible to the gardeners. Perhaps their obvious disdain for the plant is simply its difficult-to-control abundance.

Mary chunks her handful of sticks to the side as she begins to walk toward a rectangular table, about four darkened boards wide. This is her planting bench, and Judy and Mary have been potting some of

the babies retrieved from her prolific brood. These will be taken to the next native plant sale. She passes the bench and hands me a purple phlox plant as we walk by. I try to remember not to say "Thank-you," just an "I'll take good care of it" or something similar. Mary just smiles as she admits that she knows but doesn't necessarily subscribe to the "Never say thank-you for a plant" directive.

The conversation takes a turn as Mary encourages me to look toward a sunny spot in her mom's yard next door. The grapevine is in full view. "What do you see?" she asks. Before I can answer..."Look on the top." Almost covered by the full grapevines are two old sets of mattress springs. "Use everything you got," she laughs. The grapevine trellis, surrounded by irises, is situated so that Mary can add their blooms to the colors of her own garden. She designs and re-designs her garden as she sits under her trellis, drinking coffee, usually at 6:30 every morning. "I may still be in the garden at 8:00," Mary grins. "The plants are my therapy. I took care of my mom for five

years. As long as she was able, I would sit her in the garden. I could watch her and work with my plants, and we both loved it." Mary's reminiscing reminded me of my own grandmother for whom her garden served as a place of



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comfort during her later years. Like Mary and her mother, my grandmother could go from plant to plant and tell their stories. She loved them as her children and worked hard to make them behave and comfortable.

Mary's garden, too, is filled with items reflecting her love. Here a wood fern from the farm where she grew up, there a Texas lantana "Only the orange is a Texas native." She looks down, "This is frogfruit, a ground cover that stays green all year, and butterflies love it. Have you ever seen a strawberry bush?" she questions as we walk toward another bed, "It's sometimes called hearts a'burstin." The fruit is in the center of the heart shaped leaf."

"Know what this is? (A cluster of tall, green plants with wispy, fern-like foliage rises in front of us)...It's asparagus. I never harvest it. Do you need any mullein?" She bends to gently stroke the broad, fuzzy, large green leaves that look much like a fully developed head of Romaine lettuce, "The Indians used these dried leaves for tobacco; the flowers and stems can be used as an infusion tea for respiratory problems. It takes two years for the seeds to germinate." Like ancient and modern planters, Mary gathers her own seeds so that those which do not fall to replant themselves or feed the birds are saved for replanting.

Eventually, Judy, Mary and I move toward the yard that had belonged to Mary's mother. Sitting right in the middle of the yard is a gigantic tree with a fading green sign posted in front of it: **Ginkgo tree/ Official Champion Tree Ginkgo/ Ginkgo Biloba.** "Every year or so the A&M folks come to check on it," Mary says. The story of how this Chinese tree arrived in Texas remains a mystery, but for 200+ years it has shared this space with Texas Native Plants.

Back to the garden—the visit now several hours old—Mary and Judy enjoy a heated discussion about whether a plant is a flower or a weed. No winners here— just good friends interested in the same things. Like most gardeners, these two do not use Texas plants exclusively, but predominantly. Even Belinda McLaughlin occasionally disagrees with Texas gardeners as well as the USDA and their frequently changing designation of plants' origins. So...take camera in hand, since pastures and rights of way and even personal landscapes in Texas offer year-round opportunities for discoveries and snapshots.

A garden filled with Texas Native Plants is an acknowledgement of the contributions of the past and a declaration of faith in the future—a future which we can help to shape by our own land ethic and actions. The Time is NOW to "Grow Native!"

As you may well imagine, resources for learning about Texas Native



LANDSCAPING WITH NATIVE PLANTS OF TEXAS. George Oxford Miller, MBI Publishing Co., 2006. NATIVE TEXAS PLANTS: LANDSCAPING REGION BY REGION. 2nd Edition. Sally and Andy Wasowski. Gulf Publishing Co., 1997. TEXAS

WILDSCAPES: GARDENING FOR WILDLIFE. Noreen Damude & Kelly Conrad Bender. Texas Parks and Wildlife Press, 1999.

LONE STAR FIELD GUIDE TO WILDFLOWERS, TREES, AND SHRUBS OF TEXAS. Revised Ed. Delena Tull & George Oxford Miller. Lone Star Books. 2003

CONTACTS:

Four Corners Chapter, Native Plant Society of Texas
Meets 1st Thursday of each month, 7 pm, at Williams Memorial United Methodist Church/4000 Moores Lane/ Texarkana, TX/
Contact Judy Klimaszewski/ 903.628.5171 or 903.277.6313

Belinda McCoy McLaughlin/ Daingerfield, TX/ 903.645.5111/ belindamc@yahoo.com

Plants exist in abundance. Perhaps the best resources are the gardeners themselves. They are willing to share not only their knowledge but their plants, too. A **WEB SEARCH** Subject like *Texas Native Plants* will provide many directions, but several good starting points include:

www.npsot.org – Native Plant Society of Texas/ PO Box 3017/ Fredericksburg, TX 78624-1929/ 830.997.9272.

www.wildflower.org –Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center/ 4801 LaCrosse Avenue/ Austin, TX 78739/ 512.232.0100.

www.plants.usda.gov

BOOKS for reference:

HOW TO GROW NATIVE PLANTS OF TEXAS AND THE SOUTHWEST. Revised and Updated. Ed. Jill Nokes, U of Texas Press, 2001.

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PLANTING NATIVES—ESPECIALLY WILDFLOWERS

Choose plants specific to your region

WHERE to Plant

- Investigate the site carefully
 - Can you deliver water if required?
 - Is sufficient sunlight available year round?
- Remove intrusive, nonnative plants
- Prepare the soil
- Rake the area

WHEN to Plant

- Monitor rainfall and temperature—the controls for germination
- Determine composition and moisture of soil
- Plant the seeds at the right time

HOW to Plant

- Broadcast seeding works well for wildflowers.
 - Mix smaller seed with a carrier like sand or perlite, ratio 1:4

--Spread seed by walking one direction then walk in a different direction to cover

--Follow the recommended seeding rates to avoid reductions in bloom and color.

- Press small seeds into the soil by walking or rolling over the area seeded.
- Add water while the seedlings are getting started.

MANAGING Your "Crop"

- Monitor the rainfall. Developing plants need "extra care."
- Know what the seedling looks like for each variety you plant.
- Hand-pull weeds as plants grow (Hint: plant a few seeds in a pot to compare seedlings. Some look like weeds and might be "goners" without comparison.)
- Use over-the-top application of a post emergent herbicide like Ornamex 170 to kill protruding grasses.

HAVE PATIENCE

Native species planted from seeds take a while to become established.