

Recombining Nature

By RYAN MOODY

There is something intrinsically satisfying about the orange of a monarch butterfly floating across a blue and white summer sky. When one hundred butterflies are diving between the branches of a groundsel tree, the effect is like welding sparks...fleeting streaks of orange signaling a work of connection in progress.

The monarch is a recognizable symbol of the thousands of species of insects, birds, and other animals that we have the opportunity to attract to our gardens. As suitable habitat for these creatures disappears, it is increasingly critical to replace lost wilderness with new nest, food, and rest sites for the survival of bio-diversity. Although our gardens may individually be small, they collectively represent a significant ecological patchwork of potential habitat. Within this article are three ideas about maximizing the relationships between people, gardens, and local fauna.

Strong Architecture

The key to engaging birds and bugs in our garden is creating strong, lasting, and beautiful architecture that allows us to interact with the living things around us. To experience the performance of nature, we need terraces, pathways, furniture, containers, walls, and screens that invite us into a garden and allow us to comfortably stay there. These features should combine with evergreen hedges, large shrubs, and ornamental trees to provide spatial definition without limiting comfort and accessibility. When considering the architecture of your garden think big and bold; garden architecture should be as strong the space allows.

Garden architecture should overflow from existing spaces. Connections to an existing house, shed, or street are made by correlating material selections, mirroring layout dimensions,



The great plantsman Wolfgang Oehme (founding partner of the local landscape architecture firm Oehme van Sweden & Associates) parts a sea of recently planted switchgrass on a fall day. Winterberry holly shrubs can be seen reaching above the grasses in the background. Photo: Ryan Moody

replicating architectural lines, and extending view corridors. The garden should be as beautiful to look through as it is to be in. Whenever possible, I bring natural materials like stone, wood, and brick into the garden. These textures and colors complement each other as a recombination of rocks, trees, and clay that once existed naturally.



Skyscraper Gardens

Shortly after architecture school I went to Chicago and worked on skyscrapers. Although there are many differences between small gardens

LEFT: Public domain photo of a ruby-throated hummingbird from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service National Digital Library

BELOW: Bird's eye view of a Capitol Hill Garden designed by Moody Landscape Architecture. Photo: Ryan Moody



and tall buildings, there are some concepts that translate well and offer insight into increased bio-diversity in the landscape.

Structurally, the base of a skyscraper is the most critical piece of its stability. The below grade systems of a tall building are complex, expensive, rarely seen, and imperative to the success of the tower. The same applies to a garden. Below the surface, the garden soil must be able to structurally support plant growth, sustain the fungi, worms, and other creatures that provide nutrients, and texturally allow for drainage during rainstorms. Before planting, the best way to ensure a healthy garden is by testing existing soil conditions, such as pH and organic content, and investing in

amendments like compost or peat moss to calibrate the soil to the proposed plant palette.

Once above ground, successful skyscrapers are masterful in their ability to support business. Their efficiency is a result of building as tall as possible on as small of a footprint as possible. Different tenants can occupy different floors in the building allowing multiple financial and spatial needs to be met. Where ground space is at a premium (as in most cities), vertical mixed-use construction helps meet the demand of more people with less real estate.

In small garden spaces, vertically layered gardens create more habitat than a single layer landscape. By selecting plants with different mature heights, you can create floors in the garden suitable for different species. Layers in the garden may include a canopy of tall trees, an understory layer with ornamental trees and shrubs, a herbaceous layer of perennials and tall grasses, a ground layer filled with groundcovers, and a vine layer to stitch them all together.

Finally, a successful skyscraper is able to attract tenants to the space by providing an environment that meets their needs. A developer has to envision and construct a building that has the right combination of amenities and nearby infrastructure to support a business. In gardens, the necessary features required to attract native wildlife include food, water, cover, and a place to raise their young.

Most often, native plants that have co-evolved with local species provide the greatest value by offering carefully tuned resources. Although it is impossible to recreate the wilderness that once existed in our place, we can recombine the most beneficial native plants in new gardens that seek to re-establish lost habitat. Listed below are a few of my favorite regionally native plants from different garden layers that provide ecological benefits while still looking great through the fall and into winter

Black Gum *Nyssa sylvatica*- This tree is worth visiting in the

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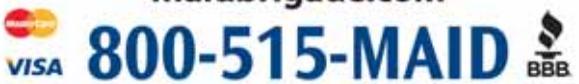
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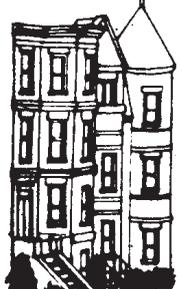
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Enid A. Haupt Garden at the Smithsonian to see its brilliant red fall color

Winterberry Holly *Ilex verticillata*- This shrubs bright red berries look great against a white backdrop or in combination with switchgrass. There is a smaller cultivar perfect for Capitol Hill gardens named 'Red Sprite' that can be seen at the entrance to the National Arboretum.

Mountain Mint *Pycnanthemum muticum*- This aggressive native perennial is a great low maintenance plant to use in mass. It attracts so many bees and beetles that the plant appears to be moving during summer months.

Switchgrass *Panicum virgatum*- This classic prairie grass is available in cultivars ranging from three to eight feet tall and provides wonderful cover and gold color during winter months.

Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*- Although we are at the southern end of this plants range, I have used it with great success in sandy soils and appreciate its fine evergreen texture and red berries.

Virginia Creeper *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*- Plant this vine next to a brick wall and watch it take off. Its red color is unmistakable in the fall.

Operative Ornament

Once vertical variety, food sources, and winter cover have been considered, you can supplement those attractions with additional features such as bird feeders, bat boxes, bird baths, and bee houses. These ornamental elements establish points of visual focus that can often be sculptural in design. I call these operative ornaments because they have functional value that can be tailored for individual species. For example, a single celled bat box that is twenty four inches tall, fourteen inches wide, and 3 inches deep and properly designed, built, and installed can attract up to 100 brown bats that each eat as many as 400 mosquitoes per hour!

Birds such as northern cardinals, song sparrows, and ruby-throated hummingbirds also eat unwanted insects, consume weed seeds, and provide us with dynamic sensory experiences. To attract a ruby throated hummingbird you can plant a native perennial like cardinal flower. However, to increase the likelihood and duration of visitors I suggest combining a handful of cardinal flowers with a small red hummingbird feeder. The feeder shown, made by Aspects Inc., is appropriately sized for a small garden.

Ryan Moody holds masters degrees in landscape architecture and architecture from the University of Virginia. He is the founding principal of Moody Landscape Architecture and lives and works on Capitol Hill as a landscape architect. For more information on Moody Landscape Architecture, visit www.moodyarchitecture.com. ★

To see which birds you can be most helpful to in urban areas visit the Audubon at Home website at <http://audubonathome.org/birdstohelp/speciesList.php?habitat=urban>

To support wildlife conservation by learning about gardens for wildlife and registering your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat visit <http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Create-a-Habitat.aspx>

To learn more about bats and download free plans for how to build your own bat house please visit the organization for bat conservation <http://www.batconservation.org/index.html>

To see a list of free upcoming Backyard Habitat workshops provided by The District Department of the Environment in partnership with Audubon Maryland-DC please visit <http://ddoe.dc.gov/ddoe/cwp/view,a,1209,q,501441.asp>

To read about how native plants work in concert with native fauna pick up a copy of Bringing Nature Home by the ecologist Douglas Tallamy (you may recognize this name from his wonderful talk at the Capitol Hill Garden Club this year)



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