Creating a Homegrown National Park

Social media and the Internet in general have been attracting a lot of criticism recently, and deservedly so. Still, we shouldn’t lose track of the fact that these means of communication also have the power to do good—even in the garden. Consider, for example, what Michelle Alfandari and Douglas Tallamy are accomplishing with their new website, homegrownnationalpark.org.

Dr. Douglas Tallamy, an entomologist (insect researcher) at the University of Delaware, has attracted a lot of attention in gardening circles over the last dozen years with his championship of insects’ role as the base of the wildlife food chain. Eliminating insects is something gardeners have done very effectively over the last generation by planting species of foreign origin that are inedible to our native insects. When you do this, Tallamy has found through his research, you also eliminate the native birds and other types of wildlife that eat the insects.

That’s why Tallamy has been urging gardeners to move to landscapes richer in native plants. If all of us in the United States, he points out, collectively converted half our lawn areas to compositions of native plants, that would create an area of wildlife habitat equal to about 20 million acres, an expanse almost ten times the size of Yellowstone National Park. The impact of such a transformation would actually be far greater that the mere acreage suggests, however, for our colossal new “homegrown national park” would be particularly prevalent in areas such as the eastern states where most of the land is in private hands and wildlife habitat is relatively more scarce.

Dr. Tallamy has been preaching the need for a homegrown national park in talks to enthusiastic audiences for some time. Last year, however, one listener, Michelle Alfandari, asked Tallamy why he hadn’t promoted this movement online. Then Alfandari, a marketing executive who has helped to spawn new businesses for clients ranging from The New York Times to the Tour de France, offered to make it happen. At the end of October, 2021, the
website for Homegrown National Park went live. In January, Alfandari added a crucial feature, an interactive map of the United States that allows visitors to register their names, locations, and the extent of their native plantings. As of mid-February, 2020, this map had already recorded 2,540 plantings, totaling 14,200.04 acres. That, of course, is just a beginning, but nevertheless a promising one.

The website offers more than just fellowship for native plants enthusiasts. Click on “Resources” and you’ll find links to national, state and local organizations that can offer guidance on native landscaping, and sources for native plants and seeds.

The website also furnishes tips on a “Get Started!” page that include all sorts of useful information, such as “10 Things to Get You Started.” In addition to such obvious steps as removing invasive plants from your landscape and planting “keystone” species — plants that support the most native insects — it also lists steps that were less obvious to me. For example, because 90 percent of caterpillars (a critical food for birds) that develop on plants drop to the ground to pupate in the surface litter or underground, gardeners should replace the lawn under their native trees with beds of locally adapted groundcovers so that the caterpillars fall onto a habitat more hospitable to their reproduction.

The advice that I believe gardeners will find most useful are the links included under “What Insects and Plants?” on the “Get Started!” page. These connect you to interactive features at the Audubon and National Wildlife Federation websites. These features are based on the work of Tallamy’s research assistant Kimberley Shropshire, who created a national database of plants that support wildlife. In the National Wildlife Federation version, typing in a five-digit zip code brings a list of plants native to that region that support the greatest diversity of caterpillars. The Audubon database focuses, not surprisingly, on plants attractive to birds and lists, again by zip code, local species that produce edible fruits, seeds and buds, as well as hosting caterpillars.

I especially liked the “Get Started!” step that urged networking with neighbors to expand individual efforts into neighborhood networks of native plantings. This, I think, is
how our homegrown national park is most likely to grow. As gardeners we have a lot of work ahead of us. The sooner we get started, the better.

For more information about homegrownnationalpark.org, tune into my conversation with Douglas Tallamy on the Growing Greener podcast: thomaschristophergardens.com/podcast.

Be-a-Better-Gardener is a community service of Berkshire Botanical Garden, located in Stockbridge, MA. Its mission, to provide knowledge of gardening and the environment through a diverse range of classes and programs, informs and inspires thousands of students and visitors each year. Thomas Christopher is a volunteer at Berkshire Botanical Garden and is the author or co-author of more than a dozen books, including Nature into Art and The Gardens of Wave Hill (Timber Press, 2019). He is the 2021 Garden Club of America’s National Medalist for Literature, a distinction reserved to recognize those who have left a profound and lasting impact on issues that are most important to the GCA. Tom’s companion broadcast to this column, Growing Greener, streams on WESU FM, Pacifica Radio and NPR and is available at his website, https://www.thomaschristophergardens.com/podcast.

Photo: University of Delaware Entomologist Dr. Douglas Tallamy has found in his research that eliminating insects from the garden also eliminates the native birds and other types of wildlife that eat the insects.