

Celebrating Second Chances

Those of us who neglected our gardens during the summer – too hot, too busy- are having a grand time playing catch up on golden days. For the dutiful among us, this is a mellow time of year, a time to enjoy late roses and early camellias. It is also a time to plan.

With growing information available we have an opportunity to push our plantings toward a more sustainable future. In our area that means native plants! Rather than plant ‘more’ it is time to plant ‘better’. In our ignorance/innocence years ago we made mistakes. Decades ago I planted purple loosestrife. Well actually it was *Lythrum virgatum* and it was not purple but a lovely rosy red. However, since *Lythrum salicaria* the wicked witch of loosestrife escaped to choke wetlands, all *Lythrum* seems to have disappeared from the market. So damaging was purple loosestrife it was on the most noxious list in 33 states. (Another plant is also called loosestrife, *Lysimachia* and one of its species, *L. clethroides* the gooseneck loosestrife is very invasive but seems to invade only in its home garden.)

Interestingly, there has been some halt to the march of purple loosestrife. Scientists at the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources released two European beetles that feed on this pretty weed. After two years there was a marked decrease and after five the reduction was even more significant. Since the beetles eat only *Lythrum*, once it goes so too the beetles.

There are two or three places on my small lot where I still pull out English ivy. I have no idea when or how it hitch-hiked in. It may have been here ahead of me like the vinca. English ivy looks as if it meant no harm but it is very invasive, crowding out native species that, having evolved in the area along with beneficial insects and other fauna, serve a purpose in the bioregion’s ecology. Native plant proponents suggest using American bittersweet or a native honeysuckle instead of the ivy. Avoid, also, the strangling Japanese honeysuckle.

Another escapee is the Norway maple, *Acer platanoides*. The leaf resembles the hard, rock, sugar maple, *Acer saccharum* but not only does it lack the glorious fall color and spring syrup, it seeds prodigiously. The danger is that this enthusiastic seeder has the power to change a native woods to a Norway maple colony, crowding out hickories, oaks, even the red or swamp maple, *Acer rubrum*. No excuse to harbor a Norway maple when there is a lengthy list of native trees among the 150 species of evergreen and deciduous maples.

Take advantage of the loss of a plant due to drought, old age, or a close encounter with a moving vehicle. First, ask yourself if you need a plant in that space at all. In our hot and humid summers air circulation is essential. Things do grow larger than expected often resulting in a crowded hodge-podge: I have several such spots. Some shrubs have conical or weeping habits best displayed when they are allowed to stand alone with perhaps just ground covers linking them to their neighbors.

When perennials need dividing, clearing space in their own vicinity to replant them will result in a more impressive display at no cost. Sweeps of one color unify a garden, nullifying that look that announces you ran into an end-of-season sale. The design is further cohering when you repeat groups of plants you already have, rather than adding the extras to your compost pile.

CABBAGES & KINGS

There is good environmental news! After a federal court decision, no longer will power plants have a free pass to emit mercury. Power plant emissions (48 tons of mercury a year) are the greatest source of this pollutant. Mercury pollution is responsible for mental retardation and other ills in infants. Mercury is so toxic that scientists say it takes only 1/70 th of a teaspoon of it to contaminate a 25-acre lake, making the fish unsafe to eat.