

Native plants come to Virginia gardens

life matters

writer: Carol Vaughn

Honeysuckle, butterfly weed, mallow, black-eyed Susan — these are just a few of the native plants travelers on Virginia's Eastern Shore can see growing along the roadside.

Now a movement is afoot to encourage the use of these wild plants in cultivated landscapes and gardens as well.

Native plants are naturally adapted to the unique conditions on the Shore, including insects, disease and, in some cases, occasional saltwater stress. They also play a crucial role in the local ecosystem, such as providing homes and food for wildlife.

For the past two years, a large group of gardeners, naturalists, nurserymen and government agencies on Virginia's Eastern Shore have collaborated in a campaign designed to win people over with the idea of using native plants in their landscapes.

The Plant ES Natives campaign appears to have taken off after an effort that has included radio ads and interviews, newspaper articles and exhibits detailing the benefits of native plants.

Along with many private gardens that incorporate native plants, a half dozen public demonstration gardens have been established where people can see the attractive results of gardening with flowers, vines, shrubs and trees native to the Shore.

The idea of the demonstration gardens is "to show people that native plants can be beautiful," said master gardener Jack Humphreys of Eastville.

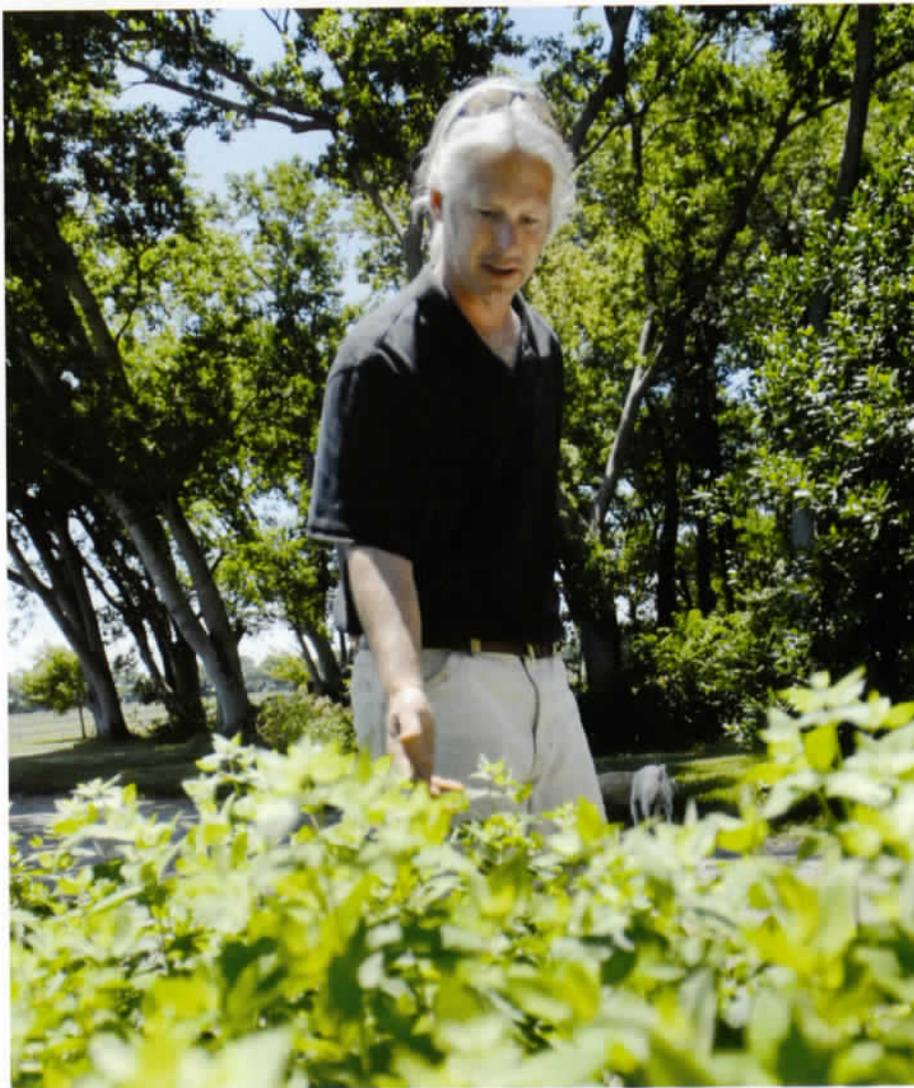
"The picture that comes to people's mind is an overgrown vacant lot," he said of the need to educate the uninformed about the advantages of native plant gardening.

Humphreys has been teaching master gardener classes in Northampton County since he moved here from Illinois six years ago. His classes have designed several demonstration gardens, including a new one being installed this summer at Kiptopeke State Park.

The 40-by-70-foot garden will be composed entirely of plants native to the Eastern Shore of Virginia and will feature a vine-covered central pergola with seating from which visitors can enjoy the view.

A formal dedication of the garden and habitat restoration project at Kiptopeke will be held Oct. 8 at 4 p.m.

Established demonstration sites where the public can see native plants are the Chincoteague Island Nature Trail, the Willis Wharf Wildlife Observation Platform shoreline landscape, the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge pollinator garden near Cape Charles, the Northampton Free Library butterfly garden in Nassawadox, and the University of Virginia Anheuser Busch Coastal Research Center maritime



Jay Diem photos

Landscape Designer Jeff Klinge points out mountain mint in a private garden near Eastville. The mint is a native plant. There is a movement to plant local native plants in gardening.

forest and The Nature Conservancy living shoreline, both in Oyster.

The U.S. Navy Surface Combat Systems Center on Wallops Island also provides a good example of landscaping with natives, following Navy policy to use native plants for landscaping where possible.

Planned sites other than the one at Kiptopeke include a healing garden at the new Onley Community Health Center, which will be completed later this year, as well as a woodland garden at the Onancock School and a garden at the new Wachapreague Seaside Park.

The Eastern Shore Master Naturalists recently received a \$2,000 grant from the Virginia wildflower license plate program to buy native plants for the Onancock School garden, which will be located near a nature trail the group is developing.

The Department of Environmental

Quality's Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program coordinates the Plant ES Natives campaign and has provided money to run it through a grant from NOAA.

The campaign launched on Arbor Day 2009 with a celebration at the Willis Wharf wildlife observation deck, where the first native plant demonstration landscape was planted.

One of the most popular aspects of the campaign is a new plant guidebook — the first dedicated exclusively to Eastern Shore of Virginia native plants. The guide, "Native Plants of Accomack and Northampton," came out in January and has color photographs and growing information for some 200 plants.

"The response to the guide has been just fantastic," said Virginia Witmer of VCZMP, who heads up the native plant campaign for the agency.

The book has been distributed to garden clubs, master gardeners, master naturalists and



Master gardner interns Marita Patterson, left, Nancy Smithwick and Julie Rogers and master gardner Jack Humphreys, second from left, hold plans for an Eastern Shore native garden at a site at Kiptopeke State Park. There is an ongoing movement to use Eastern Shore native plants in local gardens.

agricultural extension offices in both counties. Of the 2,500 copies printed, Witmer only has 150 left, but given the book's popularity, she is looking for money to reprint it.

"We're looking at it as an ongoing campaign," said Dot Field of the Department of Conservation and Recreation, a key member of the campaign committee.

The group's focus is on educating the general public, gardeners and commercial growers about native plants, she said.

"If you can get someone to plant just one or two native plants in their garden ... that's how you get it going," she said. As neighbors and friends admire those plants and ask about them, the message spreads.

Part of the effort has been to encourage people to shop at local garden centers.

"Buy local plants at local outlets; keep the money on the Shore," Field said.

Participating local nurseries give customers information about gardening with native plants and encourage their use through banners, posters and plant tags distributed by the campaign. Several have provided plants for demonstration gardens and adopted sites to ensure they remain well-tended.

The VCZMP's push to boost native plant gardening on the Eastern Shore was designed in part to protect results of its six-year, \$2.6 million Seaside Heritage program that built ecotourism infrastructure such as floating kayak docks and restored eelgrass, oyster and bird habitat in and around the seaside barrier island-lagoon system.

But the agency's emphasis on native plants actually began much earlier. A 1989 songbird study that showed the lower part of the peninsula is a critical annual rest stop for some 7 million migratory neotropical songbirds.

For more information

Information about the demonstration sites, including which plants were used, can be found at the campaign website, www.deq.state.va.us/coastal/go-native.html.

If you go

WHAT. Dedication for 40-by-70-foot demonstration garden

WHERE. Kiptopeke State Park

WHEN. Oct. 8 at 4 p.m.

What makes the Kiptopeke State Park garden project a special boon to the program is its location in that crucial "southern tip" area.

The garden the master gardeners are installing at Kiptopeke State Park is part of a larger effort there to improve songbird habitat.

Besides the garden, more than 1,800 native trees and shrubs have been planted on a 26-acre tract the park acquired last year with funding from singer James Taylor and the VCZMP.

The demonstration garden will be located near a large pond on the newly acquired land, at the nexus of several walking trails that connect to other parts of the park.

The VCZMP gave \$35,000 to plant the parcel in native vegetation.

Among the trees and shrubs planted there earlier this year were Southern wax myrtle, Northern bayberry, persimmon, American holly and sassafras, all of which provide food and shelter for birds.

Hardwood trees like American beech and

oaks also will provide insects and leaf litter for birds.

DEQ Director David K. Paylor called the parcel where the demonstration garden and other plantings are being installed "the last piece of a puzzle" to give migratory birds an uninterrupted stretch of suitable habitat in southern Northampton County.

One nurseryman involved in the native plants campaign is Jeff Klingel of Applesed Nurseries in Eastville. Klingel, with assistance from the Eastern Shore Master Naturalists, designed the program's first demonstration site at Willis Wharf, creating a shoreline landscape using Southern wax myrtle, Eastern red cedar, coastal panic grass, persimmon, coral honeysuckle, mallow, goldenrod, sea oats and aster.

Back at his garden center, Bloomers, on Route 13, Klingel lists native species in stock on a dry-erase board behind the cash register.

"We've had a tremendous influx of interest in (native varieties)" and have begun offering more native plants as a result of the campaign, he said.

Klingel stresses to customers the importance of considering the plant's native culture when deciding what to plant where.

"The most rewarding is really the fact that it's kind of helping give Mother Nature a boost. When you plant a garden, you plant it for your soul; when you plant a landscape you plant it for Mother Nature and your environment," he said, adding, "The take-home message is you can use these native plants to perpetuate nature and to satisfy and replace what was once here — and to feed the birds and the bees."