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## Locals dig their native plants

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Special to The Oakland Press



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It's almost summer, the time when most neighborhoods have one guy who has lush green carpet surrounding his house.

He is often the envy of all of his neighbors. Unless he has a well, he probably has the highest water bills on the block.

“In some parts of the country, in summer, we spend half our water on lawns,” said Bob Newport, environmental protection specialist at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Many domestic grasses require excessive watering because they have short roots, which cannot take advantage of groundwater. Nor do they create deep channels in soil for rainwater absorption.

Native Michigan plants evolved in local climate and soil conditions, amid native insect and animal

species.

“They’re adaptive to their natural environment,” said Jim Brueck, who sat on the Clarkston City Council in 2005 when a group asked to create a rain garden in the city’s Depot Park. The park’s grass could not absorb rainwater runoff from an adjacent municipal parking lot.

An Oakland Native Partnership Initiative grant funded planting of native species, which were selected to manage the excess water flow.

“There are some things that natives do better than non-natives,” said Trish Hacker Hennig, owner of Ortonville’s American Roots Nursery. American Roots sells only native Michigan plants, grown from seeds that Hacker Hennig collects locally.

“There are so many things they — plants — should be doing as well as looking pretty,” she said.

Brueck became interested in the benefits of natives and started experimenting in his own yard. He then founded Native Lakescapes, a company that specializes in creating native plant buffers along lakefronts, rivers and streams.

For those interested in starting with native plants, Maryann Whitman suggests a butterfly garden. Whitman is a master gardener, a Wildflower Association of Michigan board member and national journal editor for Wild Ones, an organization that promotes sustainable landscaping.

“Sustainable landscaping,” or “native landscaping” describes the practice of using native plants to create mostly self-sustaining environments. Native plants do not need fertilizer, run-off of which pollutes local water. The practice protects air quality by limiting mower emissions, provides plant diversity and protects wildlife habitats.

Whitman said that butterflies evolved along with native plants, so they are larvae resistant.

“If you don’t use herbicide and you don’t go crazy weeding, they’ll drop seeds,” she said. “Pretty soon you’ll have a great big pile of life. All of this works together if you let it.”

Among native plants, different species bloom at different times, Newport said.

“Almost all summer and all fall, you get something going on visually,” he said. He also dispelled the myth that native plants host more mosquitoes, saying native plants support larger mosquito-eating insects and birds.

Kirt Manecke is the founder and president of Land Choices, a Milford-based nonprofit that encourages developing conservation subdivisions, which preserve more than half of land developed for natural areas, clean water, wildlife and working farms.

“Let’s get out of the love affair with the lawns,” Manecke said. “Lawns are about as hard pack as concrete — the runoff rate is pretty similar. That’s why we push for natural landscaping. It saves money and it saves clean water.”

Newport adds there is a cost advantage to using native plants. He noted that costs may rise for the first two or three years, but “for the next 50 years, it’s way cheaper.”

The EPA supports sustainable landscaping by educating communities and encouraging removal of weed ordinances that inhibit use of native plants, Newport said.

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