BOOK REVIEW - 2004 - #1

Book: *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* (Expanded Ed., 2009) by Dr. Douglas Tallamy. Dr. Tallamy is Professor and Chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware. (ISBN: 978-0881929928). Timber Press, Portland, OR; $14.10.

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REVIEW

Rarely does something come along that profoundly changes your way of thinking with such simple, common sense manifesto. Bringing Nature Home is that uncommon example; suggesting with a combination of science and good, old fashioned, nature-centric reasoning why we should re-think the way we landscape in a manner that can be enjoyed by all. The best part is that this is a science book! It is an easy and entertaining read and effective for classroom use. The arguments are supported with data from a multitude of disciplines. Excerpts could easily be inserted into ecology, plant science, zoology, entomology, and even molecular biology and horticulture classes.

The use of native plants in landscape designs has been a steadily increasing practice. We all know the arguments against continued introduction of alien species and the reduction in use of water, pesticides, and fertilizers. We may even cite a broader context of sustainability or historic preservation in our conversion of these landscapes. What makes Dr. Tallamy's book extraordinary is the approach from his expertise in entomology and its application to a wider ecological view. Recognizing that the sprawling urban landscape is, and will continue to be, an increasingly large proportion of terrestrial habitat he proposes that landscaping with native plants can serve as a buttress to stem the tide of decreasing biodiversity. The role of urban gardens and landscaping should be to integrate into the wider ecological landscape and offer habitat rather than reduce it to a null value.

Local fauna, through millions of years of co-evolution, are dependent on the plants native to the region. "A plant that has fed nothing has not done its job"; we can all agree this is not the intent of the plant. But it very simply establishes the bottom up system of primary production with one important caveat: Alien species are not utilized by native herbivores, and thus limit the transfer of energy through successive trophic levels which alters the balance of ecosystems. To this end there is extensive discussion of what constitutes an alien plant, as well as numerous examples of their negative impact and suggestions of alternatives. The link between plants, insects, and vertebrate populations that depend on them for food is compelling, and makes the strongest argument yet for sustainable landscaping and the use of native plant alternatives.

This is a "can't miss" read for anyone interested in native plantings, urban gardens, or restoration ecology. I used it as the foundation of "Native Plants in the Landscape", and have found it influencing other portions of my curriculum. It is a fascinating new spin on a long standing discussion and I highly recommended it.