

Love Your Lakes: Gardening For Healthy Water

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Capturing pollutant-laden rain water run-off from lawns and impervious surfaces before it enters our waterways is an important step toward lake, river, and stream health. To this end, plantings of native species achieve the

dual goals of function and beauty. In addition to improving water quality by capturing and filtering run-off and controlling bank erosion, native plants add interest to our yards through their unique beauty and texture, and by the fascinating creatures they attract. These gardens provide local habitats for a diverse population of indigenous fauna at a time when their global habitats are shrinking.

The Wisconsin DNR Healthy Lakes and Rivers grant program offers support to riparian property owners in some locations for the construction of native plantings for water quality improvement. Partnering with the Beaver Dam Lake Improvement Association, we (CA) used this program to plant several native gardens as DIY projects. Our small upland **rain garden**, begun in 2016 to replace lawn, has grown into a 350 square foot sedge mini-meadow. Four sedge species form a matrix interplanted with twelve wildflower species. This array provides nourishment for pollinators throughout the flight season and host sites for the caterpillars of many butterflies and moths. The rain garden survives yearly spring flooding and late summer drought, as well as “surprise” inundation throughout the growing season. The plants within are diverse in growth form below and above ground, and act in unison to capture and filter rain water run-off. Our shoreline **wildflower buffer garden**, begun in 2018, has expanded to 1200 square feet. New plantings complement mature trees, native shrubs, and grasses already on site. The lakeshore garden is an “open system” with one uncontrollable boundary being the ebb and flow of the lake itself because we simply could not resist planting in the fertile riparian muck! Plantings ranging from emergents at the shoreline, who like their feet wet, to upland species at the boundary with lawn, work together to slow shoreline erosion. Both gardens provide essential food and shelter for wildlife, emit enticing scents, and are “eye-candy” to enjoy and photograph. Details of their design, construction, and plant selection are found online in the 2017 and 2019 Wisconsin Lakes Partnership Convention Archives by searching “Aita”.



A path to a bench in the midsummer shoreline buffer garden.

Demonstration shoreline wildflower buffer and rain gardens are on view in the Fox Lake Town Park on Blackhawk Trail. Information about planting shoreline buffer and rain gardens as well as links to garden designs and plant lists are online at “healthylakeswi.com.” Check with your local lake or river association to see if WI DNR Healthy Lakes and Rivers grants are available in your area.

Winter is an ideal time to plan and prepare for your native garden adventure. Start with pen and paper (or computer) and plot out the garden location(s), size, and the type of plants you want to beautify your yard and protect your waterway. Online catalogs of native plant nurseries for our area provide valuable ideas and pictures. The annual Horicon Marsh native plant sale is an excellent source for good quality, reasonably priced plants. This year’s sale is a pre-order event only. The pre-order form is available at www.horiconnwrfriends.org with orders due by Friday, March 26, 2021. Pick up is on Saturday, May 15, 2021 at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge on Highway Z outside of Mayville. Flats of 32 plants cost \$40 = \$1.25/plant! Half flats are available. Happy gardening.



A hummingbird enjoying a cardinal flower in the shoreline buffer garden (M. Aita, photo).