

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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Celebrating natives
plant and natural
landscapes
since 1979.

Grapevine

By Maryann Whitman

What a thousand acres of Silphiums looked like when they tickled the bellies of buffalo is a question never again to be answered, and perhaps not even asked. Aldo Leopold, 1949.

As you read in the Wild Ones President's Message: We are not native plant "purists."

Yes, I too have non-native ornamental plants in my garden. I have peonies (the ants love them) that are very old stock, planted more than 50 years ago. I've tried giving them away to the local historical society, for their re-creation of a 1930s home garden, but I've discovered that the tuberous roots of each plant occupy at least several cubic feet, testifying to their age. Every time, there has been enough rootstock remaining that the plants came back the following spring.

I have lilacs scattered in the hedgerows that have trunks several inches in diameter, a size that attests to their age. Their perfume fills the air when they bloom, reminding me of my childhood and the century-old lilacs that once grew around our house.

To the north and west of the house, grow 80-foot Norway spruces that shield the house from the prevailing winter winds. To the south grows a broad Siberian elm that is taller than the spruces, with a trunk that is 31 inches in diameter. In summer, it provides significant shade, keeping the house cool.

I have star of Bethlehem alongside the garage, and moneywort and creeping Charlie in patches here and there. I take a whack at them periodically, but only resort to drastic measures when I find them creeping too close to the woods and the oak hilltop.

I am not suggesting that everything else on our acreage is native; not by any means. My point is that there are non-native plants that I will make no effort to remove. Some serve a purpose, like all the old trees that would take a lifetime to replace. Others have been on this particular plot of land longer than I have, and it would not feel right to displace them – they have squatter's rights—I live and let live. A third variety I simply do not think are important enough to tackle, as long as they stay close to the house, where I can keep track of them. In this "semi-decision" I keep my fingers crossed.

I also have my share of the usual invasives, like garlic mustard and crown vetch, and keep discovering new arrivals, like colt's foot (*Tussilago*

farfara). To these I give no quarter. I pick my battles.

Oh, and I almost forgot: I have hostas – at least one of which, many years ago, I paid \$40 for. Fortunately, most of them, without special tending, are sparse or have been shaded out and overcome by the native plants surrounding them.

The irony is that I have just spent a good part of a sunny Saturday afternoon, standing pretty much on my head, pulling by its running roots, a native that is considered “threatened” in Virginia and of “special concern” in Rhode Island: *Physostegia virginiana*, or obedient plant. A friend gave it to me a number of years ago. I should have been suspicious when he said, “Here, let me give you another shovel-full.” I have been pulling it for several years now. I finally feel like I am making headway. I might move a “shovelfull” to a dryer, less friendly area – perhaps let it duke it out with the crown vetch. I expect the hummingbirds are fond of its tubular flowers.

I have started mowing and chopping at my cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) seedlings. I love my

cup plants. When they’re in bloom it sounds like the insects are about to lift off with the entire patch, and during droughty summers I always know where I can find some tree frogs to charm a visiting youngster – in the cupped leaves.



However, I’m finding its seedlings proliferating around the sheltered corners of other prairie plants. Once they establish, their deep taproots can survive anything short of a direct lightning strike.

I am also keeping a careful eye on the *Rudbeckia laciniata*, and on the prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*), mowing paths around the patch where it lives with Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), and a variety of sedges. I am beginning to understand that some native plants belong where “the buffalo roam.”