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Chesterton educator lectures about restoring the earth's eco-balance with native plants



A Monarch waystation at the Taltree Arboretum native plant garden.

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A retired school teacher who taught elementary school with an emphasis in environmental education, Peg Mohar doesn't have the mien of a revolutionary. But when Mohar spoke last Saturday at a Gibson Woods Wild Ones meeting, she talked about a simple way to restore and rejuvenate our environment in her presentation titled "Go Native: Soothe Your Soul and Save the World."

"If everyone planted natives, we'd be able to repair our ecosystems," said Mohar, a former executive director, board member, volunteer, and part time employee as land assistant for the Shirley Heinze Land Trust as well as a volunteer guide for Mighty Acorns and a former Dunes Learning Center board member. "We can pay reparations for the damage to ecosystems we have incurred through human activity by turning parts of our yards into the native landscapes we replaced. Plant, and they will come! Native gardens attract the native bugs, birds, and butterflies once populating our area."

Mohar said her talks about native plants and nature have evolved over the years, but she has been greatly influenced by "Bringing Nature Home" (Timber Press, \$27.95), a book by Doug Tallamy, chairman of the department of entomology and wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware in Newark, about how gardeners can slow the rate of extinction by planting natives in their yards. To prove his point, Tallamy cites studies that connect habitat destruction with species loss. Locally, the impact can be seen with the

decline and near disappearance of the delicate Karner Blue Butterfly. Just 30 years or so ago, the duneland woods might have seemed blue with the large population of the Karner Blues that feed on wild lupine, but as the lupine disappears, the Karner Blues do, too.

“We humans as a species have waged an undeclared and unintentional war on the millions of other species with which we share this planet,” Mohar said. “The unintended consequences of our turning the native landscapes to our purposes has been to reduce the numbers or remove completely many species of plants and animals. Bringing back native ecosystems — starting with planting of native plants — is a simple but effective step everyone can take to give back.”

Gibson Woods Wild Ones is a local chapter of Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes, a nationwide group formed more than a decade ago with the mission of educating people about the benefits of using native plants. Such groups, and educators like Mohar and Tallamy, want to help others understand that gardens brimming with lilies, hydrangeas and rosebushes don’t provide nourishment to insects, birds and butterflies. Indeed, Tallamy points out in his book that butterfly bushes only benefit adult butterflies, because they like the flower’s nectar, but their larvae can’t eat it.

“They might as well be plastic,” said Tallamy about certain ornamental plants that fall in the “not in our backyard” category.

But natives doesn’t have to mean a garden of taupe and brown. Instead, pretty patches of phlox — which comes in several different colors — can feed eight species of butterflies.

Mohar credits her love of the outdoors to growing up on a family farm in Central Illinois.

“The diversity of wild flowers on our family farm was not nearly as large as what’s here in Northwest Indiana,” she said. “That’s the interesting thing about The Region, with its smokestack industries and the dunes and its amazing biodiversity.”

Mohar lives in a wooded area near Chesterton.

“We were fortunate to find land that was biodiverse and hadn’t been over-grazed,” she said. “We have an unfolding of flowers starting in March and going on until the frost. On our property I have found over 200 native species.”

To illustrate her talk, Mohar showed photos of local winners of the 2011 Shirley Heinze Land Trust “Bringing Nature Home” awards, such as Jay Gallagher, developer of the green and sustainable East Edge Homes in Miller, who uses native grasses, dune grasses and native prairie flowers like black-eyed Susans, goldenrod and lupine instead of a lawn; the Taltree Arboretum native plant garden overseen by Patty Stimmel; the restoration of a cattail marsh led by Susan Mihalo and Gerry Lehmann at Long Lake Marsh in Ogden Dunes; and Franklin Academy Native Landscape in East Chicago sponsored by BP Whiting.

“This year Spencer Cortwright was awarded a BNH award in the individual category,” Mohar said. “He has turned his Valparaiso lawn into a prairie planting.”

Gallagher says that once established, the maintenance requirements of a native garden are very low.

“This area was a natural prairie and it wants to return to that,” he says. “All we have to do is help it along a bit and it will do quite well. The water that it would take to support a traditional lawn would be wasteful, not to mention that the chemicals needed to keep a lawn green would be constantly leaching into the groundwater and eventually into the lake.”

It's all about returning native plants to where they belong and they in turn will nurture the soil and give nourishment to insects which in turn become bird food. The birds then pollinate the plants creating an interconnected loop and one that saves our resources and is good for our earth.



The restoration of a cattail marsh at Long Lake Marsh in Ogden Dunes was led by Susan Mihalo and Gerry Lehmann.



Spencer Cortwright was awarded a Bringing Nature Home award in the individual category, for "turning his Valparaiso lawn into a prairie planting."