

Native Plants

By John Combs, St. James' Care for Creation Committee

Native plants should be the backbone of any landscape that wants to be welcoming to the creatures that occur naturally in our area. Native plants are defined as the plants that evolved, without man's interference, in the local environment. For purposes of this essay, I am going to focus on native birds since they are perhaps the most widespread and easily observed creatures on a consistent basis in our area. If native birds can flourish in your yard, you can be sure that native pollinators and a host of other animals are present as well.

Impacts of human actions have caused a rapid decline in most species around the world including in our area. The rapid decline of birds represents at least a 70% decline in song birds since the 1950's. The number one cause of the decline of most species including birds is loss of habitat. Montgomery County in 1950 was primarily undeveloped farmland or forest. As the residential boom spread rapidly through Montgomery County large tracks of land were quickly converted to housing, shopping centers, schools, churches etc. and native plants were replaced with whatever the developers decided to plant, often non-native species. Loss of habitat continues today and remains a principal factor in species decline.

We certainly do not propose or expect that this development will be reduced or that future development will be stopped. However, several visionaries have proposed workable ways to mitigate some of the damage to the local ecosystems that will allow a much greater number of native birds and other species to survive. The key to this mitigation is to plant more native plants around our homes, shops, parks, churches, and office complexes.

Dr. Douglas Tallamy, a professor of entomology at the University of Delaware has documented the dependence of most of our native birds on insects and especially insects that have caterpillars. It makes sense that when a Bluebird is trying to feed three to five very hungry hatchlings, being able to deliver a series of caterpillars is much more efficient than trying to present as many calories with small insects such as ants. Most small song birds are dependent on caterpillars and other large pupa/larva to successfully reproduce.

Butterflies and Moths which have caterpillars are highly dependent on Native Plants. Each species of Butterfly and Moth have one to several species of plants where they consistently lay their eggs. Female Butterflies and Moths have special cells on their feet that allow them to taste the plant leaf and determine whether it is one they prefer so they can lay their eggs on the proper plant. The eggs hatch as tiny caterpillars that immediately begin to eat the leaves and grow providing just what Native birds need.

If we want our colorful native song birds to persist, we need to plant a variety of Native plants which will support the significant numbers of caterpillars required. The obvious question is what to plant if we want to keep a variety of native song birds. There are several computer tools to help in the selection process such as: <https://audubon.org/nativeplants>

or <https://www.nwf.org/nativeplantfinder> or Dr. Tallamy's <https://www.bringingnaturehome.net>.

Dr. Tallamy also has two very helpful books including *Bringing Nature Home* and *Landscaping with Native Plants*.

An excellent source of information on this topic is the Maryland Native Plant Society which has a very well-done full color handbook titled *Landscaping with Native Plants* which is available on line at www.mdflora.org. Many of our local garden centers carry native plants and there are a number of local organizations that have special native plant sales in the Spring. Lists of sources are available from the Maryland Native Plant Society web page www.mdflora.org under Native Gardens and a cooperative effort of the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a publication titled *Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping* which can be downloaded from nps.gov/plants/pubs/chesapeake/pdf/chesapeakenatives.pdf.