Rewilding Suburbia in the American Prairies

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Sit for 10 minutes in front of just about any aster in autumn in Nebraska, and you will witness diverse communities of adult insects and bugs rising and falling for hours on end. Some are stashing pollen in nests for overwintering larvae, some are fueling up for migration, but for a time they are all speaking the same language of hunger, desire, and hope. Of course, if that aster was planted by us, the satisfaction is high. Some gardeners choose plants native to their local area specifically to provide for wildlife, particularly pollinators. In the food chain it's plants first, then insects—each building upon one another in a purposeful crescendo.

But in North America 5,000 acres are converted into lawn every day—a high maintenance, high input monoculture that has become the default landscaping mode from homes to businesses to schools and churches. 20 trillion gallons of freshwater are used on ornamental lawns, whereas 30 trillion gallons are employed for food production. Right now, the United States boasts enough lawn to equal the size of the state of Georgia. Here in Nebraska, as it is in most rural-dominated stated of the central U.S., most people live in the large urban centers of Lincoln and Omaha. Most of the state has been converted from prairie to produce corn and soybeans, while the majority of remaining grasslands are grazed for cattle production. But it's in those urban areas—where people reside but don't have much if any contact with nature—that we need to re-engage ourselves with the environmental issues and benefits. We need contact with daily wildness to stoke the embers of awareness and change.

As humanity tumbles forward into the sixth mass extinction, every space we interact with most intimately and frequently can become an island of refuge, and with enough islands we will create habitat corridors. Our power is immense if our compassion for others is up to the task. Diverse landscapes help non-human cultures just as they help our own—kids with a view of complex nature out of classroom windows see test scores improve, creativity increase, and are better able to work in groups. Plants cool our cities, clean our air, and remediate soil while reducing stormwater runoff. Plants provide habitat and shelter and food for fauna up and down the trophic levels—in fact, plants (along with the insects and bugs they foster), could be said to be the base of the planetary food chain. Plants are useful.

As a garden designer working in the urban core, primarily in Lincoln, Nebraska (a city with a population of 300,000) as well as Omaha, Nebraska (a city of 500,000), I know

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that mimicking local wild plant communities is not simple or easy—partly because we can never truly replicate what is beyond the fence or what once existed in ways we'll never know. In a virgin tall grass prairie—99% of which has been eradicated in the central United States—there may be dozens upon dozens of species in one square foot, an impossible task in a garden bed where both aesthetics and cost dictate a more simplified plant community. But when we select native plants from the same wild communities, we know they will grow well together, knitting their lives to one another as they move about, come and go, echoing some of what was while providing for some of the wildlife that still exist here in the urban interface. Celebrating natural processes of self-sowing instead of demanding suffocating annual wood mulch applications that curtail plant reproduction is one way to let plants teach us. As the garden grows more wildlife come, teaching us in spades about our homes and the voices silenced by our dominate human cultures. As we let go of our constant helicopter parenting as gardeners and land managers that demands urban landscaping all look the same, we see what's possible in our world–that as we cultivate diversity and freedom in our urban landscapes, we inherently pave the way to do so in our own human societies. Gardening for nature is liberating and empowering, and perhaps, a subversive act.

In midsummer in Lincoln, Nebraska, the blooms of Echinacea purpurea (purple coneflower), Echinacea pallida (pale purple coneflower), and Eryngium yuccifolium (rattlesnake master) skyrocket above the other plants, creating exclamation marks that provide platforms for pollinators. Eryngium itself is recorded to support over 200 adult species of insects and bugs, while the Echinacea are host plants for silvery checkerspot larvae (Chlosyne nycteis).

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When we begin to look at our landscapes through the perceptions of other species, we practice liberation and empowerment. Liberation of dominate thinking that privileges one species over others, and empowerment to foster equality among all species together. Wherever you are, with whatever patch of land you have, every plant makes a difference. It certainly makes a difference for the larvae of black swallowtails.

Rewilding is a process of creating a loose facsimile of indigenous plant communities. In highly-altered urban areas such as this one in Lincoln, Nebraska, the original site conditions are long gone, but many of the native plants have evolved to thrive in a variety of environmental realities. And while the place may be gone forever, the wildlife that depend on those plants are still looking for what they need–which in turn is what we need.

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Thick, layered, natural-based landscapes are incredible carbon sinks. They also help amend soil naturally, clean soil, reduce stormwater runoff, filter and cool the air, and provide us a sense of peace and mental restoration. When we experience thick, thriving nature, we begin to understand our world in some radical new ways.

What does it say about the American culture when we cultivate a short monoculture with valuable freshwater, toxin-spewing machines, and industrial fertilizer? Seldom-used spaces of lawn are the antithesis of spaces where we cultivate physical and mental vitality. You can kick a ball around for a while in lawn, but you can't learn the culture of a lightning bug or prairie toad or goldfinch because they aren't present. And so, we aren't fully present, either.

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Every garden space matters, such as this garden in Lincoln, Nebraska. Every plant matters, like a rattlesnake master (Eryngium yuccifolium) or coneflower (Echinacea purpurea). The image shows dozens of species. For the health of other species and the health of our families, bringing the wild home means developing empathy and compassion on a profound new level that we all need in a time of mass extinction and climate change.

Beauty can be found for all species in all seasons. A garden left standing in winter provides wonderful colors, architecture, and seed heads upon which snow delicately balances. And the plants provide shelter for birds, nest cavities for overwintering bees, leaf litter for hibernating amphibians and butterflies—all while continuing to produce a plethora of ecosystem services.

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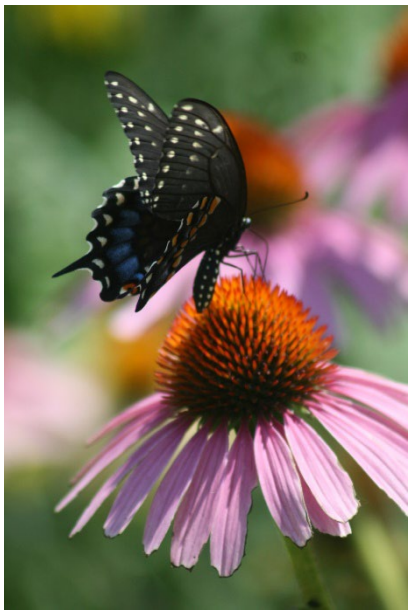

Time stops when you sit next to a bloom and watch what comes. Your life falls away and, in a moment of soft light, the walls fall down as we let another being penetrate our perception. As we perceive a butterfly nectaring on a bloom, we understand all life shares the simple desire to thrive—to have what we need to not only survive but abound with joyful purpose as we find safety in that which nourishes and nurtures us. The garden is not just for me—it is for them—but is an act of defiant compassion where we actively practice the idea that other species have equal rights to our own, The garden becomes an exercise of radical hope that we can do better for all of us—human and animal—in an industrialized world suffering from marginalization and loss. Yes, a flower can carry that weight if we let it.

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