

NATIVE PLANT SPOTLIGHT: CY GREEN THUMB EMBRACES INDIGENOUS FAUNA

This is the fourth in a series of interviews on designing with native plants for our urban gardens, perfect for getting ready for this year's garden walk, whose theme is "Cooper-Young Goes Native."

This month's expert is Mike Larri-vee, Cooper-Young resident, Cooper-Young Community Association Sustainability Chair, and all round great neighbor to our community. Visit Mike's garden at 1846 Nelson during our 3rd annual garden walk.

Mike grew up on a subsistence farm in New England, and until just the past few years thought of wildflowers as pretty decoration around his vegetable gardens and orchards. Recent revelations provided by Dr. Doug Tallamy have drawn him towards the idea of urban wildlife habitat restoration and permaculture, and he is excited to talk your ear off about the value of replacing your alien ornamentals with beautiful native trees, shrubs, and perennial wildflowers.

Last year, Mike's garden was certified as a "National Wildlife Federated Garden". On his urban homestead he keeps beehives, chickens,

ducks, and a turkey named Penny. The plot on Nelson Avenue is host to eight raised vegetable garden beds, ten fruit trees, high bush blueberries, blackberry, and strawberry patches. There is also a homemade workshop made from recycled materials that serves as headquarters for 2x4niture, his upcycled furniture endeavor, and the Compost Fairy, a neighborhood composting and soil building initiative he created with a collective of friends and fellow Cooper-Young residents.

Garden visitors will be able to see and purchase home and garden products on display at the entrance to his workshop. If you don't see what you're looking for, Mike is happy to take orders for custom work. Check out his studio and garden at 1846 Nelson.

Tell us a little bit about your occupation and background.

Ha! Which occupation? I'm a licensed professional geologist, and I work in environmental consulting doing many things but mostly petroleum remediation. Fully qualified to go to work for Darth Vader (Exxon,

BP, etc.) but I like to sleep at night and I figure I don't need a big house in suburbia and a jet ski all that bad.

I'm also co-founder and executive director of The Compost Fairy, a soil building and waste diversion non-profit. We are brand new and expanding in many directions all at once. Two projects that I'm extra excited to talk about are our new residential subscription service (we pick up kitchen scraps, and deliver finished compost to our clients and to school and community gardens) and our partnership with NPI, Knowledge Quest, and many others in the South Memphis Trees project. We intend to plant 4 million trees in the city of Memphis



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Compost Fairy is building an army of volunteers under the #recompoymemphis banner. I have a pile of degrees including geography, biology, and earth sciences. I am a Fulbright Scholar. Did I mention I like dirt and trees, especially native ones?

When and why did you become interested in native plants?

When I realized that most of the well intentioned “pollinator” plants I was putting in my yard were exotic and were actually starving and interrupting the life cycle of the animals that I was trying to help. Trees have always been my thing, I just kicked into high gear when I saw how much of our canopy we were losing in Memphis and how little was being done about it. Stewardship is the responsibility of every single one of us, land owners especially.

How strict are you on the term “native plants?” What is your definition of native plants?

Pretty strict. My property is designated as a wildlife habitat, and I have over 70 native species on my quarter acre. Ecological services, especially in terms of habitat are key. Native critters can’t use exotic plants to raise their young’uns. Caterpillars and larvae are the bulk of the first trophic layer in the food web. Where are we without that?? “Nativars” are a new area of interest to me. Dr. Tallamy has some research publishing soon on that which I am very interested to read.

Why should homeowners include native plants in their gardens?

See my stewardship comment above. Exotic plants of any type in your landscape should occupy the same amount of your property as desert does your diet. Just a taste, if you must.

How do you feel about mixing both natives and showy non-native ornamentals in a garden?

I recommend natives almost exclusively. I have non-native plants in my yard that come from Europe and Asia. I eat them. I also have my great grandmother’s iris and toad lily. They are my only indulgence other than what grows without my input in my chicken pasture. The chickens eat that. I weigh the carbon offset saved in food transportation against the native habitat that would be there otherwise.

What particular native plants stand out as “must haves” for the Mid-South region?

Trees. Oaks host 557 species of lepidoptera. *rubekia*, *echinacea*, and *aster* are great herbaceous flowering bed plants that you won’t have to fool with. Sunflowers are native. *Helianthus maxmillii* is a great one and 12 feet tall!

What native plants are not recommended for small urban gardens and why?

I never recommend high maintenance plants for landscapes. Pick the right plants for your site or change the site. If you live in an urban area, you need to pick plants that are adaptive to urban conditions and challenges like compacted and nutrient poor soils, air pollution, and urban heat island effect.

So many people want to grow natives but don’t know where to buy them. What do you recommend?

You can drive demand in the marketplace with your pocketbook. I have had a number of nurseries order natives for me. Dan West and Dabney are good about it. Diane and Wolfgang at Gardens Oy Vey have tons of native plants. I’m working with John Jennings at Urban Earth to promote and sell natives and adaptive nativars. Ask, ask, ask. Most natives are easily grown from seeds as well. Lots of resources on the “interwebs.”

Is there anything else you would like to say about native plants?

Plant them and plant them more densely. This sea of mulch and monoculture grass (lawn=yawn) ecotones don’t exist naturally in the eastern deciduous biome. Your backyard is the environment. Treat it that way.

What is the best way for interested gardeners to reach you?

Call me up 901.383.3549 or email me at mwlarrivee@gmail.com. I work for beer sometimes if I like you

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