

GARDENING WITH A GREATER PURPOSE

By Margaret Fisher

Photos Submitted By Liz & Tommy Cramp

Little Rocky Run resident Liz Cramp has caught the native plant bug, a highly contagious fever that is heading toward pandemic status in Northern Virginia. Once someone hears the science behind gardening with native plants, something clicks in the brain, and healthy yard practices follow. The basic principle is that most insects can only eat the plants with which they evolved. Baby birds and numerous other critters rely on those insects for food. Without native plants, there are fewer songbirds, and the rest of the local ecosystem falls apart as well.

which seeded itself in and threatens to strangle the nearby trees.

Liz has adapted other healthy yard practices as well. For example, she placed saucers in the garden with water for the birds and butterflies. Her three nesting boxes are filled with baby Eastern Bluebirds, Tufted Titmice and Carolina Wrens. When a large oak died after a dramatic lightning strike, rather than cut it down to the ground, she left the lower fifteen feet standing to take on a new life as food and nesting area for woodpeckers and their prey.

Fortunately for homeowners, there is a plethora of native plant species that work well in a suburban landscape. Native trees such as oaks provide the bulk of the food for the ecosystem, but native shrubs, perennials and grasses play an essential role as well. Liz and her husband Tom have arranged their landscaping so it supports nature while still fitting in the neighborhood from an aesthetic standpoint. Turf grass is non-native and does nothing for the ecosystem, but a small amount makes a nice contrast with the landscaping beds which she is gradually filling with native flowers. The back third of her property has been left wooded, where the only care needed is to guard against invasive plants such as Asian Wisteria,

Recently, a volunteer visited Liz and certified her property as an official Audubon-at-Home Wildlife Sanctuary. Liz earned this designation based on her healthy yard practices and by spotting at least ten sanctuary species, including tiny Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, cheery American Goldfinch, and a 16+ inch Pileated Woodpecker, all visiting her feeders. Anyone can request an Audubon-at-Home visit to get free advice on how to use their yard for this purpose. For those looking for suggestions about which native plants to buy, the Plant NOVA Natives website www.plantnovanatives.org has photos and details on where to plant them and where to buy them.

