

L/Real Estate

Anthony Marinello, owner of Dropseed Native Landscapes in Malverne, converted his parents' property into a native garden and meadow.

Back to nature

Using native plants cuts costs of homeowners' labor, landscaping **C8**

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Native plants take root



Greg Lowenthal suggests starting small when switching to natives.

How some LIers embrace low-maintenance, lower-cost and biodiverse greenery

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Anthony Marinello used to spend \$200 to \$300 a month — excluding fall and spring cleanups — on professional landscaping and maintenance of his family's West Hempstead property. Before that, he spent at least two hours a week mowing and maintaining the property himself.

Now, he barely spends any money taking care of the 75-by-100-foot area, which only needs weed-whacking three times a year so their neighbors don't complain it's unruly.

During the past eight years, Marinello, 32, has converted the lawn from foundation to curb into a meadow and flower beds, with more than 200 varieties of colorful plants native to Long Island. His only costs are new plantings, Marinello said, adding that his neighbors regularly stop by to admire the riot of color.

However, his goal wasn't to avoid lawn care. Rather, by trading lawn for natives, Marinello, a certified permaculture designer and owner of Dropseed Native Landscapes in Malverne, said he's supporting the Long Island ecosystem and the accompanying biodiversity.

That's just one benefit of switching an entire lawn — or even just sections — to native plants, which include flowering perennials, grasses, trees, shrubs and ferns, Marinello said. And he and other local experts say the steps to get

started are relatively easy with some preparation.

WHAT ARE NATIVE PLANTS?

Natives are plant species original to the local habitat and not introduced by humans or other means, said Greg Lowenthal, president of the Long Island Native Plant Initiative (LINPI), a volunteer cooperative whose mission is to preserve our local native plant population.

"A good rule of thumb is if it existed before the colonists, then it's likely a native species. They are best adapted to survive and thrive in our local environmental factors," he said.

Colleen Doyle, 51, of Babylon, a native landscape designer and LINPI member, said that most of the plants available at local nurseries are hybrids of natives. "But more often they're cultivated European and Asian plants that we've decided over a period of time are what look good in our yards."

Doyle said these transplants lack the resilience needed for Long Island's environment. They struggle against local pests, often lack the root structure to survive without irrigation, and many fail to thrive without chemical intervention. "They're not resilient — they're decorative. And because of that, they need to be maintained," she said.

Because they've adapted for survival, natives don't require pesticides or fertilizers and they use less water, said Marinello. In fact, he said he



Greg Lowenthal, LI Native Plant Initiative president, spent 5 years transitioning his landscape to natives.

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was able to turn off his in-ground sprinkler system, saving at least 1,000 gallons of water a season.

PERENNIAL BIODIVERSITY — AND COST SAVINGS

They're also cost-effective, according to Lowenthal, 43. Not only are they similarly priced to nursery plants, but most are also perennial, so once they're established they'll grow yearly.

Lowenthal, who has been slowly replacing parts of his front and back lawns on his one-fifth acre property in East Northport, said cost can depend on how much space you want to fill.

"I'm a little obsessed with buying plants. The first year I spent under \$500 for multiple areas. Now I spend around that every year in plant material," he said.

Marinello said his initial investment was \$1,000. But there are rebate programs and organizations and nurseries that make them affordable.

Another reason to plant natives is that they support biodiversity by introducing habitats and food for insects, birds and other wildlife, according to Doyle, founder of the design and consultation company Grounded Gardens.



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

Duong Vu, a board member of ReWild, has been converting her Dix Hills property to native plants and says her son, Jacob, has been excited about the wildlife attracted to them.

"I don't have a bird feeder, but I have anywhere between six to 12 different families of birds that call my little backyard home because I have so many native plants to support them," she said.

'PRICELESS'

Duong Vu, a board member of ReWild, a nonprofit promoting native plants and sustainable landscaping on Long Island, began converting her 1-acre Dix Hills property to native plants in 2020. Since then, she's changed her way of gardening.

"I was spending \$600 to \$1,000 a year just on my front lawn, and now I'm spending money on my natives, but feel better about it," said Vu, 41.

Financial gains aside, what she enjoys the most, she said,

is her 6-year-old son's reaction to the wildlife drawn to the native plants.

"I think our biggest gain was my son's enthusiasm, the fact that he wants to learn and wants to be outside in the garden is priceless to me. That's something money cannot buy and it's just part of his way of life."

HOW TO GET STARTED

1. Plot it out

Kimberly Simmen, owner of KMS Native Plants LLC in Lake Grove, through which she operates a Native Plant Pickup Yard, said an ideal scenario is 70% native plants and 30% ornamental for a home property. But she admits that the idea of an all-native front lawn can be a hard sell here where most homeowners value the uniformity of green lawns "and

think natives are weedy looking."

"But adding any native plants to a yard makes a big difference. Maybe your backyard is where you want to experiment," she said.

Consider starting small, said Lowenthal, a software developer, who has been replacing his property's corners and borders with more than 100 native species during the past five years. He recommends concentrating on areas that aren't doing well: corners where the neighborhood dogs come, the sprinklers don't hit, there's a lot of foot traffic and in shaded borders.

Simmen, 52, a horticulturalist, suggested the grass on the sides of your house and the "hell strip" in between the sidewalk and the curb.

"Around the mailbox put in

plants like emerald blue or fort hill snowflake phloxes, butterfly weed or even native grasses, which are highly salt tolerant if the areas are close to the street and snowplowing," she said.

You can also just put natives in planters to start, Simmen said. "You'll be amazed at how many pollinators you'll bring in."

2. Prep the planting areas

Doyle suggested picking a spot and noting the site conditions. "If you get the right plant into the right place, they'll do nothing but produce for you." She recommended checking with the LINPI database, in which you can input the conditions, like shady or partially sunny, for plant suggestions.

Then start adding garden beds by digging up sections of your lawn. Lowenthal recom-

mended an 8- to 10-foot corner, like a pizza slice or a rounded edge. He said a less labor-intensive strategy is the "lasagna" method: In the fall, put down cardboard on an area that you want to kill, layer on some soil and then keep it wet.

"By spring the cardboard will have started to break down, and it will prevent the grass from growing. You can start planting in that area immediately," he said.

Marinello said another technique is to just stop watering and see what's able to survive on its own.

3. Reduce selectively

That doesn't mean you need to get rid of all your non-natives, said Diane Meyer, 61, a retired art teacher who lives on one-quarter acre in South

See **NATIVE PLANTS** on C10

Low-cost native plants can boost ecosystem

NATIVE PLANTS from C9

Setauket and started a native garden in 2020.

“Don’t think that you have to rip everything out. Hydrangeas aren’t native and I’ve kept all of them because they’re pretty and I like them. And I have peonies that line the fence in the front yard,” said Meyer, who initially spent \$350 on native plants.

“But I added one specific native plant called Jacob Cline bee balm and all of a sudden hummingbirds started to visit my backyard. I’ve been able to build my garden to the point where I can solely sustain hummingbirds and it’s my own mini-ecosystem.”

However, Marinello said it’s necessary to remove any plants that are labeled environmentally invasive species by the state — like bamboo, porcelain berry ivy and English ivy — which will compete with native plants.

4. Choose the right plants

Once the planting areas are ready, Simmen suggested selecting about

three varieties and doing larger swaths of plantings depending on the size of your lawn — three, seven or nine of each — to keep it neat looking.

Then consider the three-tier system of different heights, Doyle said.

The first is a ground cover foundation.

“Next can be wildflowers and the third height might be shrubbery, which can have berries for our birds,” she said. “It’s really important to set it up that way, because we want to move towards having minimal to no work past that second and third year.”

For example, Doyle suggested a three-tier combination for a dry, sunny, 50-square-foot area: about 10 creeping phlox plants for a ground cover; about five each of butterfly weed and New York aster for wildflowers; and two New Jersey tea plants for bushes. She said for about \$300, this “combination provides pollen and flowering beauty from early spring to late fall.”

5. Plan now, plant later

But summer heat can be tough for



NEWSDAY / STEVE PFOST

Kimberly Simmen, who operates a Native Plant Pickup Yard in Lake Grove, said an ideal scenario is 70% native plants and 30% ornamental for a home property.

new plants, so Marinello said if you’re new to native planting, this is a good time to “figure out what you want to do, your plant palette and design plan, and then you can start planting in the fall or next spring.”

He added it helps to learn more about natives first and there are many local organizations that can help. For instance, not only does LINPI have a database to help you select plants for your property

conditions, its main site points toward helpful news and information.

ReWild Long Island, which has six chapters, has community programs including composting and ReWild Walks and Talks. The Long Island Native Plant Gardening Group on Facebook connects native plant gardeners in Nassau, Suffolk, Queens and Brooklyn. And Grounded Gardens can help with consultations and designs.



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