

Spring Is Here, Fairfield! Plant An Ecosystem, Not Just A Garden

by Kim Eierman Lifestyle 03/31/14



A Question Mark Butterfly. Photo Credit: Flickr user Tiwago

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, N.Y. -- Spring comes as a welcome relief after a brutal winter. Your garden awaits! Pause just for a moment before rushing off to the garden center. This spring you can have a beautiful landscape and improve the environment at the same time. It will just require thinking (and acting) a little differently.

With so many creatures in decline (bees, butterflies, birds, amphibians), it is more important than ever to garden to support your local ecosystem. If you want to see butterflies, songbirds, and beneficial insects, you will need to tweak your gardening practices. Here are some tips to get you started:

Reduce or eliminate the “Green Desert” (lawn/turf). Our turf grasses are not native to the U.S. and do not support our local environments. Replace exotic turf with a diversity of regional native plants that have evolved here, and accordingly, support many other species. Keep only the lawn that you really use, and plant the rest with native plants.

Think “layers” when planting. In this part of the country most of our landscapes would revert to forests, if we let them go. Forests have layers - tall canopy trees, shorter understory trees, a shrub layer, a perennial layer (including: flowering perennials, native grasses, sedges and ferns), and finally, a ground cover layer. Different wildlife species depend upon different layers. Help them out by planting in layers. Our usual suburban landscape trio of tall trees, foundation plantings and grass, makes for a lousy ecosystem.

Let diversity be your guide. Bio-diverse landscapes with many different plant species are more resistant to pests, diseases and extreme weather events. In the face of climate change, plant diversity is more critical than ever. A large garden bed of hosta may look beautiful, but its ecological value is minimal. Plant a wide variety of native plants.

Skip the secret sauce – pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides. Rachel Carson warned us about pesticides in 1962 in her book, *Silent Spring*. It is estimated that over 90 percent of the insects in an average home landscape are beneficial or harmless. A healthy ecosystem will always have some damage – for example, Monarch caterpillars must eat Milkweed leaves to survive. Tolerate a little bit of damage in your landscape to support nature. Keep in mind that organic pesticides may be just as lethal as their chemical counterparts – especially important for bees and other valuable insects.

Enjoy your refreshed landscape this spring, filled with life and beauty!

Kim Eierman, a resident of Bronxville, is an environmental horticulturist and Founder of [EcoBeneficial!](#) When she is not speaking, writing, or consulting about ecological landscapes, she teaches at the New York Botanical Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, The Native Plant Center and Rutgers Home Gardeners School.