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The Cover

*Look at the cherry blossoms!
Their color and scent fall with them,
Are gone forever,
Yet mindless
The spring comes again.
~Ikkyu*

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EcoBeneficial Gardening: Beyond Sustainability

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With natural areas rapidly diminishing, species declining at historic rates, and climate change dealing new blows to environmental health, our managed landscapes have never been more important. Challenged pollinators and threatened Monarchs are just the tip of the ecological iceberg.

Unfortunately, many of our traditional gardening and landscaping practices have contributed to unhealthy ecosystems. The American love affair with exotic turf lawns is just one example of how we have compromised the environment we depend upon. Sustaining these compromised landscapes just isn't enough.

EcoBeneficial gardening is a new approach that utilizes our landscapes to improve environmental health. It's a powerful concept, empowering gardeners to become ecological stewards. Simple changes in

our landscaping practices can make major environmental improvements—no matter the size of the landscape.

With these 20 steps, you can help transition any site into an EcoBeneficial landscape:

1) Reduce or eliminate the “Green Desert” (turf/lawn).

Exotic turf grass is an ecological wasteland of little value to other species. While offering little, it demands a lot—copious amounts of water, fertilizer, and labor. Keep only the lawn that you really use, and lose the rest. When replacing lawn, don't replace one monoculture with another. Plant diversely using regionally appropriate native plants for best ecological function. A meadowscape is one great alternative to a turf lawn.

2) Increase the health of your soil.

There are more microbes in a teaspoon of healthy soil than there are people on Earth. Everything starts with the soil—healthy soil makes for healthy plants, which are the basis for a healthy ecosystem. But how healthy is your soil? Is your soil compacted? Overloaded with synthetic fertilizers? Do a soil test to determine the baseline of your soil and, even better, do a soil bioassay to determine the fungal and bacterial activity.

Then, work with the native soil you have—in most landscapes compost will be the key to increasing soil health. Trying to reinvent your soil pH is an endless and losing battle, so work with the pH Mother Nature provided.

3) Avoid synthetic pesticides.

Synthetic herbicides, fungicides, pesticides, and rodenticides (collectively known as “pesticides”) are frequently devastating to sensitive creatures like bees. Determine if the “damage” you see in your landscape is really damage at all—or perhaps just a butterfly caterpillar feeding on the leaves of a host plant or



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a leafcutter bee taking what she needs to line her nest. Rachel Carson warned about pesticides 50 years ago in her book, *Silent Spring*. Not good for wildlife, not good for you and your family.

4) Limit the use of organic pesticides.

Use organic pesticides only when absolutely necessary, and then, sparingly and carefully. Organic does not mean benign. Before using any pesticide, determine if the problem is really a problem, and if it is—choose a narrow spectrum treatment, not a broad spectrum one.

5) Support beneficial insects, nature's pest control.

Plant a diversity of native plants to support beneficial insects with both habitat and food sources. Encourage the local populations of beneficial insects and skip the imported insects that can introduce new diseases.

6) Tolerate some messiness in your landscape to support wildlife.

Dead logs, tree snags, leaf litter, and brush piles are homes for many creatures. Dead leaves are nature's mulch and compost—leave leaves in place as much as possible (although not on the Green Desert).

7) Tolerate some plant damage in your landscape.

Valuable insects have to eat too, and they don't eat very much. If you enjoy seeing butterflies, then you need to sacrifice some leaves of the host plants their caterpillars require. Want more song-birds in your landscape? Support the multitude of insects that most birds feed to their young. To quote Voltaire: "Perfect is the enemy of good." You are not perfect and your landscape doesn't have to be either.

8) Leave flowering perennials and native grasses standing through winter.

Seed heads and stems can provide food and

cover for many overwintering birds and insects. Leave perennials standing through winter and cut them back in early spring.

9) Plant more native plants to support your local ecosystem.

Native plants have co-evolved with each other and with the wildlife around them. Some creatures, like specialist bees, have very specific interactions with a limited number of native plants. Plant diversely, or lose valuable species.

10) Think "plant communities" when selecting plants.

Native plants don't grow in isolation. Learn which plants grow together naturally in your region, and plant that way. You will support more species that depend on these increasingly challenged ecological communities. Check the website of your state's Department of Natural Resources for information.

11) Eradicate the exotic invasive plants in your landscape.

Invasive plants threaten the natural balance that exists in healthy ecosystems—displacing native plants and the ecological services they provide. When removing invasive plants, always try organic, mechanical means first—and research the best method and time of year for removal. Be persistent and be patient. It may take a while.

12) When invasive plants are removed, replace them quickly and thickly, favoring plants that are native to your region and





appropriate to your site. **Competition is the key to suppressing invasive plants.** Select native plants that can stand up to the conditions. While Common Milkweed may not be the best choice for a formal garden, it can hold its own against many invasive competitors.

13) Limit the use of exotic, ornamental plants and understand their limitations. Plants that have not evolved in your region will not provide the same depth of ecological services to your ecosystem. While an exotic forsythia may appeal to you, it does little for a native bee in the spring, or a hungry migrating bird in the fall.

14) Encourage biodiversity by planting diversely. Science has proven that bio-diverse ecosystems are more resilient to pests, diseases, and the impacts of climate change. Plant diversely, but also plant sufficiently. It is far easier for a pollinator to find a sizeable target than to happen upon a single plant.

15) Select natural forms of native plants for best ecosystem dynamics. Cultivars that vary greatly from their native counterparts may not offer the same resources—a columnar selection of a native tree may have branching that deters birds; an odd colored “nativar” may not attract pollinators.

16) Avoid double-flowered plants. Double-flowered plants often have less nectar, pollen, and seed than single-flowered plants, or may be completely sterile. Re-

serve “doubles” for an ornamental indulgence in the garden, not for great ecological function.

17) Provide a water source for wildlife and insects.

A clean, fresh source of water is crucial for wildlife but often forgotten in many landscapes. Whether a man-made pond, a natural stream, or a bird bath, make sure to include year-round access to water for wildlife. Think “wildlife ramp” not “deep water dive” and offer easy access for creatures large and small.

18) Emulate healthy local natural areas in your garden.

Use nature as your reference for structure and plant selection—it will make for a much healthier ecosystem. Most natural ecosystems are layered, offering different levels of habitat for different species. While one songbird species may prefer to nest in the shrub layer, another species may prefer tall canopy trees. Reflect natural ecosystems to support your native wildlife species.

19) Always plant the right plant in the right place.

Some plants are flexible about where they are planted, but many are not. Proper plant placement will promote plant health and help deter pests and diseases.

20) When choosing plants, find the beauty in ecological function.

As Mom said: “Physical beauty is only skin deep.” Appreciate plants for what they do in nature, not just how they look.

For more information on EcoBeneficial gardening, please visit: www.ecobeneficial.com.

—*Kim Eierman is an Environmental Horticulturist specializing in ecological landscapes and native plants. She teaches at the New York Botanical Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, The Native Plant Center, Rutgers Home Gardeners School and several other institutions. Kim is an active speaker nationwide on many ecological landscaping topics. She also provides horticultural consulting to homeowners and commercial clients.*