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Natives, Nativars & Nativists

John Friel



I recently dined with three old friends, all of whom This Space has cited and/or interviewed at various times.

Neil Diboll is the founder of Prairie Nursery in Wisconsin. C. Dale Hendricks, who co-founded North Creek Nurseries and Green Light Plants, now lectures internationally on sustainability and permaculture. Simple (yep, that's his whole name) is an independent garden designer, former nursery owner and true hands-on polymath.

Dale and Neil have championed native plants since long before natives were cool. Which brings to mind a quote by erstwhile Ball columnist Kerry Herndon: "When you're ahead of the market, there's no market." In the mid-1980s, Neil nearly gave up trying to sell what many still considered weeds. Fortunately, he hung on while the market caught up.

Our free-range discussion kept gravitating back to native plants. We all agreed that "native" and "invasive" are not mutually exclusive terms. That runs counter to much pro-native rhetoric, but my favorite definition of "weed" is this: Any plant growing where it's not wanted. Crashing the garden party isn't just for aliens.

Dale is a naturalist to the core, but no native purist. He told me years ago, "I grow natives to expand people's palette, not to restrict it."

Shortly after this felicitous feast, I caught an NPR program, 1A, hosted by Jenn White, featuring Neil with fellow panelists Dr. Douglas Tallamy, U-DE, a famous champion of indigenous species, and Desiree L. Narango, Ph.D., Vermont Study for Ecostudies.

Dr. Tallamy's cogent commentary touched often on his book, "Nature's Best Hope," which lays out a plan, simple in design, but audacious in scope, to dramatically increase the world's natural areas. The concept: Harness the latent power of America's lawns, a staggering total of 44 million acres that offer practically nothing to insects and birds, by converting them at least partly to native plants. The book has morphed into a movement with (naturally) a website: Homegrownnationalpark.org.

Neil called lawns "a useless status symbol inherited from 17th-century Europe." I still recall a particularly effective PowerPoint combo in a Tallamy lecture from years ago. Slide one: Aerial view of suburban neighborhood with broad

swaths of manicured lawns. Slide two: Aerial view of barren desert sands, which he called “The same neighborhood, as a bird sees it.” Touché.

My ears always perk up when the subject is birds. I’ve traveled many thousands of miles to observe avifauna and will do so again. There are simply no uninteresting birds. Most people like birds and dislike bugs, but if you want the former, you need the latter. Even hummingbirds derive most of their nutrition from insects. And even if you want just the prettiest bugs, i.e., butterflies, AKA “flying flowers,” their caterpillars need nearby habitat. Neil said, “If my leaves don’t have holes in them, I’m a failure as a gardener.”

Neil and Dr. Tallamy did most of the talking, but Desiree ably fielded questions from gardeners in the radio audience with sage advice: Talk to those who know your specific region, e.g., your local extension agent.

Dr. Tallamy and I part ways when it comes to our opinions on plant selection and hybridization, which he frowns upon. In my four decades in horticulture, and long before, plant breeders made tremendous strides in improving more ornamental, food and industrial genera than would fit here. Ergo, I can’t completely agree that natural selection is to be preferred in every case.

I believe the popularization of natives—including nativars bred for improved habit, new colors and more flowers—has had a beneficial effect on America’s gardens and gardeners. And breeding, especially in genera like echinacea and rudbeckia, helped ease those natives into our borders, which in turn helped spotlight the importance of pollinators. Early in my marketing days I’d shoo bees away from flowers I wanted to photograph. Ten years later, I was stalking them through the garden, silently willing them to land on something I sold.

I had to admire Dr. Tallamy’s pragmatic approach. “Don’t think about the whole earth,” he exhorted the audience. “That’s depressing. Focus on the property you control.” **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.

The A1 broadcast on NPR was a good listen, and thanks to the magic of the internet, you too can catch it at your convenience. LISTEN HERE.