

WILD BY DESIGN

Consumer and municipal interest is fueling a trend for natural landscapes that perform

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

As home gardeners and municipalities increasingly embrace naturalistic gardens, they have become a force in the green industry.

Amid the debate around “wilding” and/or “rewilding,” there are significant reasons to admit some wild back into our plantings. This practice increases biodiversity that is otherwise in decline. It improves soil health while reducing garden inputs.

Yet most experts aren’t advocating conversion or restoration to native landscapes, as these are not simple to define or implement. Instead, they suggest finding ways to incorporate wildlife and relaxed planting styles into our landscapes without sacrificing beauty, function, or structure.

A natural focus

Monrovia Nursery Company (Farwest booth #17037), has a name for this trend — “Wild Meets Refined.”

“For many gardeners, the focus is on growing plants that are good for the environment where they live, but they want their garden to look beautiful,” said Kate Tamony, Monrovia’s chief marketing officer and trend spotter. “They’re looking to create a looser, more natural looking landscape, without a lot of maintenance. They want a garden that attracts pollinators and birds and brings the feeling of a meadows or prairie. These gardeners may be drawn to native plants, but they are still looking for reliable and long-lasting blooms.”

Monrovia’s website pitches it as follows: “The Wild Meets Refined garden proves you don’t have to choose between ecological awareness and elegance.”

Erin Duffy Jones, landscape architect, and horticulturist with the small firm Landline Design (Portland, Oregon), is »

Previous page: *Agastache* 'Peach Pearl' breaks out in a riot of blooms for months and attracts pollinators, making it a strong "wild, but refined" selection. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY

seeing a surge of interest in this direction in both residential and commercial projects.

"More homeowners in the past several years have been interested in this style, especially those concerned with sustainability, habitat, low-water use, and low-maintenance," she said. "We've also seen an increase in demand for this style on some commercial and multi-family residential projects."

A new look at an old idea

As early as the 1800s, garden designers like Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson were advocating for "naturalistic gardening" to release the Victorian grip on gardening, which was famous for its conservatories, plant collecting, and intensive formal annual displays. The pendulum swing resulted in English perennial border gardens and romantic woodlands. This, in turn, influenced parks and public

spaces in the United States.

"The desire for naturalistic gardens isn't new," said Chuck Pavlich, director of new product development at **Terra Nova Nurseries** (Canby, Oregon). "In fact, Gertrude Jekyll in the late 1800s advocated for less formal structure in garden and appreciated and promoted less structured garden beds. Much like the painter Monet, she too had diminished eyesight and adapted garden beds to please her vision with color texture and less formal architecture. Terra Nova has always appreciated Jekyll's perspective, especially when creating gardens for the Pacific Northwest."

What is feeding today's renewed appreciation for naturalistic landscapes? Certainly, heightened awareness of the planet's environmental challenges is contributing. Ecological designers recommend planting more to cover the ground, while urban planners may be asked to include permeable

pavement and native plants. "Wild" plantings seem to offer a low-care solution.

Duffy Jones said, "I think it's an aesthetic that stems from the desire to mitigate climate change and habitat loss wherever possible, while saving on watering. It's a natural progression away from the more sterile approach of a very minimalist modern design."

But there's something else.

"I feel the driver for this trend is the desire to unplug from the formality and rigidity of everyday life and simply relax our view to destress," Pavlich said.

In a time where commitments feel overwhelming, the garden should not be another source of stress.

Wild plantings, from flower-studded lawns to suburban mini-prairies, promise that freedom — but without proper planning they can become snarled by invasives and fail to deliver.



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Challenges of wild gardens

Wild gardens typically include native plants for their robust adaptation to the local climate. Locally native plants offer strong environmental benefits but with caveats: limited availability, often lanky habits, variable performance across conditions, and generally shorter bloom times than cultivated non-natives. The idea that a garden must be all-native can be a barrier to entry and may not even be a realistic one.

There may be a public misperception that native plants can take care of themselves, which can cause disappointment. Native plantings need regular follow-up care to keep invasives at bay and manage self-sowers. Even meadows need reseeding of annual flowers for the first two years before perennials get established.

Duffy Jones noted, "A landscape that

looks unkempt where it needs to appear more intentional will eventually result in the very thing we're trying to prevent — excessive use of herbicides, pesticides, power tools and a sterile, yet 'under control' landscape."

Their clients receive a maintenance manual detailing seasonal tasks.

"We also highly encourage (or beg — haha!) our clients to never excessively prune/shear their plants into balls and rather allow them to grow together," she said. "Plants that grow together to cover the ground keep weeds at bay, retain cooler/moister soil, provide more and better habitat to insects and birds, and create healthier soil by self-mulching. When our gardens are allowed to grow this way as intended, maintenance can be quite low once we get past the first 2–3 years of establishment." »

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Left: Dark Fire Montbretia (*Crocsmia* 'Dark Fire' PP35303). Right: Picture Purrfect Catmint (*Nepeta* 'Picture Purrfect' PPAF) PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY.

Taming the wild garden

One person's wild can be another's weedy, especially if that person is used to boxwood topiaries. Landscape architect Joan Iverson Nassauer coined the term "cues to care." These are elements that signal the hand of the gardener, showing that the landscape is tended and intentional. This could be as simple as clear, clipped pathway edges, a mown path through a meadow, and a bench or sculpture tucked into a patch of wildflowers.

Even signage explaining "This yard feeds the bees" helps neighbors and weed inspectors interpret what might appear to be chaos.

Combine natives with climate-adapted partners

It doesn't have to be all-or-nothing when it comes to natives. The National Wildlife Federation advocates working towards a goal of 70% natives. Combining natives with non-natives may be the most effective strategy.

Monrovia's design offers an approachable hybrid approach mixing in climate-appropriate plants.

"Having a natural-looking garden doesn't have to mean choosing only native plants, especially if there is a climate appropriate plant that fits their needs better, provides more blooms or stays more compact," Tamony said.

The bones that make the garden work

Thoughtful design, Duffy Jones said, incorporates client's needs and maintenance preferences, along with a structure of evergreen shrubs and grasses that offer a "consistent presence throughout the year."

"In our climate, evergreen shrubs and grasses are very important as the bones of these designs," she said. "They can serve as a backdrop, a buffer, a groundcover anchor, and a low-maintenance way to beautifully fill space as a foil for seasonally showy perennials and grasses."

Natives and regional native shrubs she favors include Oregon myrtle (*Myrica*

californica), silk tassel (*Garrya elliptica*), manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.), and California lilac (*Ceanothus* spp.).

Reliable exotic evergreens include curry plant (*Helichrysum italicum*), rock rose (*Cistus* spp.), compact strawberry tree (*Arbutus unedo* "Compacta"), autumn moor grass (*Sesleria autumnalis*), mountain pepper (*Drimys lanceolata*), pineapple guava (*Acca sellowiana*), giant feather grass (*Stipa gigantea*), Mexican orange blossom (*Choisya* cvs.), and waxleaf privet (*Ligustrum* "Texanum").

But if she had to pick one group?

"For me, it's manzanitas. They have it all: a variety of shapes and sizes, interesting form, pretty and pollinator-friendly blooms, small-but-not-messy fruits for native birds, and amazing bark. And all in a package that is tough, drought/heat/winter rain tolerant, low maintenance, and evergreen. I would love to see more varieties available in more sizes, we can rarely find as many as we want!"

Terra Nova's Pavlich said, "For structure,



Athyrium 'Pewter Lace' (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*). PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

I like upright, compact plants like *Kniphofia* (poker plant) and *Crocsmia* (montbretia aka coppertips), especially *Kniphofia* 'POCO™', and 'Butter Brickle' and *Crocsmia* NOVA® Gold Dragon. Both are blooming machines

and very low maintenance.

Monrovia recommends open-form evergreen like Tight Squeeze™ Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata* 'Green Sport'), Sea of Gold® Juniper (*Juniperus* × *pfizeriana* 'Monsan')

or Gold Coast® pittosporum (*Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'PITG722' PP35361).

Flowering shrubs do double duty, providing wildlife habitat and creating a focal point in the natural garden. Examples include Sparkler® Arrowwood viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum* 'SMVDE' PP28092), Berry Poppins® winterberry (*Ilex verticillata* 'FarrowBPop') or Black Tower Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* 'EIFFEL 1'). Tamony noted grasses like *Carex* 'Fine China' sedge, Stars and Stripes bulrush (*Scirpus pendula* 'Stars and Stripes'), Smoke Signal little blue-stem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Smoke Signal'), and Ginger Love fountain grass (*Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Ginger Love') lend airy definition of pathways or edges or acting as focal points.

Trends and plants to watch

Demand is increasing for native plants and new native hybrids with garden-ready characteristics: longer bloom time, showier flowers, compact or tidier habit. The need for compact plants intersects with all plant sectors because of denser urbanization.

Pavlich said Terra Nova has been »



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breeding for climate adaptability for years incorporating native plants. “For each native plant we use in our breeding, we first examine the best traits of the plant, then the least desirable and go about fixing the perceived problem to make them a more desirable garden plant.”

Current favorites for naturalistic planting include *Athyrium* ‘Burgundy Lace’ and ‘Pewter Lace’ and *Hakonechloa* ‘Stripe It Rich’. “Some of our newest introductions that are already receiving great accolades from several different trial garden stations include *Heuchera* ‘Changeling’, *Agastache* ‘Pink Pearl’ and ‘Peach Pearl’, *Echinacea* REVELATION® ‘Monarch’. Monrovia recommended Sol Giatto oxeye sunflower (*Heliopsis* ‘Sol Giatto’), SunMagic® Petite Burgundy coneflower (*Echinacea* ‘Petite Burgundy’), Peach Pearl agastache (*Agastache* ‘Peach Pearl’), Dark Fire Crocosmia (*Crocosmia*

‘Dark Fire’ PP35303), Picture Purrfect catmint (*Nepeta* ‘Picture Purrfect’), and BeeMine™ red bee balm (*Monarda didyma* ‘Balbeemed’). “All of these varieties are improvements in either habit, color, or flower power,” said Tamony.

Up next? Look for new lavenders, *Echinacea* and *Tulbaghia* ‘Darkstar’ and ‘Starburst’.

The industry opportunity

The expansion into looser styles of planting and a wider plant palette offers exciting challenges and opportunities to meet the public’s needs while educating them for their best success.

While Jones highlighted locally sourced native species as the optimal choice for restoration and natural sites, she said improving the supply of reliable plants adapted to hotter drier conditions is the industry’s biggest imperative. Meanwhile native cultivars

and selections are enriching the toolkit for designers and nurseries working in urban and suburban landscapes.

The growers and retailers who meet this need and can help their customers make their strongest choices will maximize the impact of this movement — and perhaps its most powerful side effect: a garden alive with butterflies and bees grows new gardeners.

“There are lots of things to love here,” said Jones. “How alive these kinds of gardens are — and not just the plants themselves, but with pollinators, birds, and people.” ☺

Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing zone boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at EricaGrivas.com and A Gardener’s Path on Substack.



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