

A Changing Landscape More in Tune with Nature



Do you sometimes wonder what Newtown will look like in the next decade or so, with so many changes taking place? If you have lived here for a while, you will remember more rolling hillsides with open meadows and bucolic views that felt more rural than suburban.

That vague, uneasy feeling that a changing landscape is indicative of something bigger and more important is validated and explored by Doug Tallamy in his book “Nature’s Best Hope”. Tallamy cites the

numerous ways that we have despoiled most of our previously pristine, self-sustaining landscapes. He suggests that we must act individually and collectively to put our ecosystems back together. A cultural transformation will start with the realization that we are part of nature and acting “as if we were the product and beneficiary of a vibrant natural world, rather than its master.”

Newtown is a perfect example of suburban living where tidy housing developments provide a lifestyle insulated from the natural world. Wildlife is usually thought of as an intrusion on our property, lawns are drenched with pesticides and synthetic fertilizers, and landscaping consists of plantings that most likely are species that evolved in Asia, Europe or South America – all practices which do little or nothing to nurture nature, and in many cases actually put our bees, beneficial insects and birds at risk.

Tallamy to the rescue with his message of hope and the belief that individuals can have an impact on their own yards which collectively will make a significant difference. The solution is called Homegrown National Park, a name derived from the fact that half of the 20 million acres currently held in private ownership in the U.S. is a bigger number than all the acres of the national parks combined. Creating your own homegrown “park” will not only bring butterflies and birds to your yard, but also will do much to increase the healthy functioning of habitats in your neighborhood and beyond.

Planting native plants will be at the heart of your plan. Native plants are those that support native populations of bees and other insects because they have co-evolved with one another, being perfectly suited to meet their mutual needs. Important new research shows us that some natives, “keystone species,” are particularly valuable in supporting complex and stable ecosystems. Some keystone plants are white oaks, black cherry, goldenrod, smooth aster, black eyed Susan (*rudbeckia*), and tickseed (*coreopsis*). For a complete list of keystone plants, go to [NWF GFW Plant List Ecoregion8.indd](#).

Another important aspect of creating prime habitat is the removal of any invasive plants. Invasives crowd out native species and create dead zones as far as most wildlife is concerned. Common invasives include Oriental bittersweet, mugwort, and Japanese knotweed. Removal techniques vary but please do not use toxic chemicals on them as you may be harming valuable bees, beneficial insects, birds, and other plants.

Since most of us have larger lawns than we really need and since lawns are all too often treated with toxic pesticides, it makes sense to reduce lawn areas. Creating new beds or enlarging already established beds are ways to create interest and beauty to your yard, making a start at creating that Homegrown Park right in your own yard.

An excellent opportunity to hear Doug Tallamy himself will take place on March 14 at 7 pm, a Zoom presentation through the Booth Library. Reservations can be made at 203-426-4533. You will be fascinated by Tallamy and the positive message he sends. In fact, the Homegrown National Park initiative is being launched here in Newtown this spring, so stayed tuned for details on how you can participate.

In conclusion, adding natural plantings to our front and back yards will not prevent development from taking place in Newtown. However, visually it will create a softer, lush looking Newtown, a visual break from acres of manicured lawns, and one that suggests a closer connection to nature. Additionally, this network of viable habitats will be a boon to the vital plants and animals that sustain us. This is the Newtown we would like to see in the next decade or two.