

CLAUDIA
THOMPSON

EVERY
GARDEN
MATTERS;
EVERY
LANDSCAPE
COUNTS

What happens when an ecologist and environmental educator (me) marries an architect and urban designer (my husband)? It catalyzes a world view that breaks down perceived boundaries between urbanity and nature, and a strong belief that our human future depends upon much better integration of our built environment into healthy ecological systems. It teaches us that the potential to promote biodiversity in urban settings goes far beyond what most people believe is possible. And it brings much joy, as our own experiment gives us the opportunity to appreciate birds, butterflies, and nature right at home.

Early in my career I held a fairly conventional view of conservation, focused on the importance of larger parks, preserves, and relatively undeveloped land to the protection of “nature” and biodiversity. In forests and places where our human footprint was light is where I led field trips with my students, and where I went to enjoy plant communities and to observe wildlife. It wasn’t until my husband and I bought a house in Cambridge in my late 30s, that my views began to evolve. Experience is a good teacher.

In searching for a home, I had advocated to live further out from the urban core where open space is relatively abundant. In contrast, my husband, the director of urban design for Cambridge, was passionate about living in, and fully understanding through personal experience, the city that would become the focus of his career. After several years of debate and much searching in the metro area, we finally settled on buying a two-family property in the city; it had a good amount of open space by urban standards (7,300 square feet) in a neighborhood of mostly two and three-family houses. My husband got the Cambridge experience he craved, and I got enough land to do some gardening. I jumped in to transform our rundown, older property into a landscape of beauty, and I began like many gardeners—choosing plant species by hardiness zone, tolerance to light and shade, and the visual characteristics I found appealing.

Fortunately, that approach didn’t last too long. By the late 1990s, I had successfully removed or controlled ten different invasive species on the property, including Norway maple, goutweed, garlic mustard, black swallow-wort, and others. (The work of the Massachusetts Invasive Species Advisory Group was well underway, ultimately leading to the state’s Prohibited Plant List, which went in effect in 2006.) Concurrent with my determination to rid our land of marauding flora, I began planting many more native species in our gardens, and even removing some of my earlier non-native selections that were particularly aggressive or that seemed increasingly out of place.

Intuitively, I liked the look and feel of many of the native species together. More notably, I began to observe more and more bird species, so I started keeping records. To date, I have now recorded at least 77 different species using our Cambridge garden habitat— chickadees, nuthatches, hummingbirds, flycatchers, kinglets, hawks, wrens, sparrows, orioles, finches, and more. Many of the avian visitors are neotropical migrants such as warblers or thrushes arriving in spring or fall, foraging for insects on the native trees or in the leaf litter that enriches my woodland garden. We have even seen woodcocks, resting unobtrusively after their long migration, and no doubt headed in search of wetlands to the north or west.

The ecological highlight of my urban experiment has been attracting a pair of downy woodpeckers to nest in a snag in our back garden, created by leaving an old tree trunk to become standing deadwood. From April through early June one spring, we witnessed the real magic of life. The parent birds took several weeks to excavate their nest hole. After the eggs hatched, they flew back and forth almost continuously bringing thousands of caterpillars for their fast-growing young to eat. Then, we actually saw one of these newly minted birds fledge from the nest, flying off into the world solo for the very first time. What a treat and an emphatic lesson this was, demonstrating the deep ecological potential of even our smallest landscapes.

Over twenty-five years my urban garden has allowed me to conduct a grand and fun experiment. By creating a landscape using largely native plants, and one that embraces ecological processes, my home now makes a significant contribution to conservation. And the 21st century requires this paradigm shift, a new view that conservation must take place everywhere. It can no longer be viewed as important only on “protected” lands. There simply are not enough of them to support our steadily declining numbers of migratory songbirds, amphibians, and other species, and managing existing conservation land is becoming ever more challenging because our human footprint is deepening everywhere.

Conservation of life as we know it can only happen if we adopt a new world view that sees human activity and behavior as integral to the ecological whole. It must begin at home and take place throughout our communities. Hence arose our Grow Native Massachusetts philosophy: Every garden matters ~ Every landscape counts.* Given what I accomplished on one small parcel, just imagine what we could do for the health of our ecosystem and our communities if we all join this effort together.



Female downy woodpecker feeding caterpillars to her young in my garden. He fledges one day later.



Wilson's warbler eating a caterpillar on my Amelanchier tree by the back porch. (Photos by author.)