

SOHO

MAGAZINE

C L E V E L A N D

SOPHISTICATED HOMES & LIFESTYLES OF NORTHEAST OHIO

SPRING 2009

Nesting makes a comeback

Local families go from house to home for maximum relaxation

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At Home With: The self-described "Queen of Macedonia"

Beauty Concessions: Looking good for less

Travel: Cleveland's sister city rolls out the red carpet in Rouen, France

Sustainable gets *savvy*

"Tough but beautiful" backyard landscapes deliver high-impact aesthetics with low-impact ecological footprints

By MARSHA MCGREGOR

BlueLake Institute of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History sponsored the Feb. 7 event.

"Sustainable gardening got a bad rap because it wasn't always beautiful," says the event's keynote speaker and award-winning Ohio-based garden writer Tracy DiSabato-Aust. "But now we know more."

Better yet, DiSabato-Aust says, earth-friendly gardening is also homeowner-friendly. Eschewing a contrived and fussy design mentality that requires overhybridized plant species, labor-intensive maintenance and an arsenal of pesticides allows us to adopt a more natural approach that frees up our time and resources. The result? We spend more time enjoying our landscapes than coddling them.

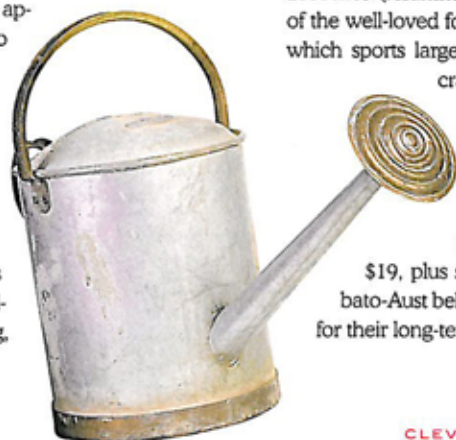
DiSabato-Aust hopes to appeal to "busy people who think they have no time to garden." Her books address questions such as "How can we have plants we'll be passionate about that are still environmentally sound?" and aim to help gardeners reduce time spent dead-heading, dividing, weeding,

staking, pruning, transplanting and watering.

DiSabato-Aust's latest book is "50 High-Impact, Low-Care Garden Plants" (Timber Press Books). It compresses her field experience and substantial knowledge into a roster of "indomitable trophy plants" that meet of all, or almost all, of 12 stiff requirements that translate into sustainability, year-round beauty, long life and easy care.

Some of her favorites include the tricolor beech tree and 'Ogon' dawn redwood; ornamental hydrangeas 'Endless Summer' and the pale icy green 'Limelight,' as well as 'Henry's Garnet' Virginia Sweetspire. A few of the flowering perennials that score high on her list are Siberian Iris, Baptisia (false indigo), Spiny Bear's Breeches (Acanthus spinosus) and a stunning variety of the well-loved forget-me-not, Brunnera 'Jack Frost', which sports large, variegated leaves that "look like cracked porcelain."

Some of her chosen 50 must be special-ordered from nurseries, and a handful are downright pricey (one pot of Brunnera 'Jack Frost', for example, can cost up to \$19, plus shipping and handling). But DiSabato-Aust believes they are worth the investment for their long-term value in the garden.



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Beauty Runs Deep

Following DiSabato-Aust's presentation, Holden Arboretum tree root physiologist Mary Topa's talk was a clear reminder that true landscape beauty starts below the surface. Research indicates that 80 percent of tree problems originate below ground, because of insufficient rooting space, poor soil drainage, soil compaction, roots severed during transplanting or construction, root diseases, nutrient imbalances, drought and soil composition that is poorly matched to the tree's cultural requirements.

New housing developments, in particular, present problems for sustaining healthy trees, especially young trees, because the topsoil often has been stripped away and hauled off. Replacing topsoil is crucial for tree vitality: While the older, woodier roots of a tree primarily serve as food storage and transportation systems, its short-lived, fine roots are the most biologically active and responsible for drawing in necessary nutrients. Since 70 to 90 percent of those fine roots are located in the upper five inches of the soil, an investment in good topsoil will pay off for years to come.

Ohio soil is infamous among gardeners and landscapers because of its heavy, clay-like composition. To prevent shallow tree-root systems that will cause large trees to easily topple during high winds or heavy rainfall, Topa recommends going beyond soil amendments

such as compost or leaf mold that encourage deeper roots. Other measures to help trees remain strong and healthy, so they can withstand environmental stresses:

- Assess the soil environment before planting or have a professional assess it for you.
- Plant species that match the soil environment. Good choices for our region include red maple, pin oak, tulpe and willow.
- In addition to soil amendments, consider site adjustments that improve drainage.
- Don't plant trees too deeply. Uppermost tree roots should remain in the top two or three inches of soil.
- Don't mow over tree roots or within the "drip line" (the area inside the outermost limits of a tree's branches). Instead, rake leaf litter into that area or mulch it – but avoid "volcano" mulching, which causes roots to stranglehold the trunk below the surface. Grass is the poorest choice for under trees; eliminate it by laying down several layers of damp newspaper in the fall, followed by a layer of mulch.

- The less tree roots are disturbed, the better. Plan paths and walkways to divert foot traffic from areas inside the drip line. If you plant flowers underneath trees, avoid annuals and choose native perennials that will compete less for crucial nutrients and eliminate the need for annual digging.
- Water deeply and regularly during a drought.



Ohio author Tracy DiSabato-Aust says, "Gardening is romantic and glamorous. We want gardens to stir memories," she says. Her battle cry: "All the bling without the sting."

TRACY DISABATO-AUST 50 High-Impact, Low-Care Garden Plants



Tough-but-Beautiful Plants that Anyone Can Grow

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Options for Lawn Lovers

We are a nation obsessed with our lawns, but turf madness can wreak havoc on ground water, air quality and the survival of species critical to maintaining biodiversity. While sustainability purists recommend replacing turf grasses with native groundcovers, ornamental grasses and perennials wherever and whenever possible, weekend warriors who don't want to give up their lawns can pursue alternatives that apply less stress to the environment and result in a lower ecological footprint.

Alec McClennan, owner of Good Nature Organic Lawn Care, analyzed the results of decades of research and turf management (some desirable and some not) to arrive at organic lawn-care solutions that revolve around testing soil, addressing nutrient needs naturally and minimizing tilling. He espouses an approach that sounds radical to diehard turf traditionalists but offers many advantages: planting "micro-clover" in the lawn. "It will spread out more evenly, it won't flower and attract bees so bare feet are no problem, it's greener than grass and it fights weeds," McClennan says. He is even in favor of "low mow" varieties of grass seed, which produces lawns that need mowing only twice a year. "The important thing is you need to relax your height limitation ideas, that traditional lawn look," he advises. "[Low-mow grass varieties] work well in the back yard and in semi-shaded areas, but not in front if you have to have the manicured look."

Small Efforts Make a Big Difference

The overriding theme emerging from the symposium was that everyone can do something to reduce their backyard ecological footprint. Small steps taken by individuals matter almost as much as broad-sweeping changes in industry practices.

Perhaps to illustrate that point, the Cleveland Botanical Garden walked the green talk in all aspects of the event. Presenter handouts were available online only to reduce paper waste, attendees were asked to return their plastic name tag holders at the end of the day for reuse and lunch waste was recycled, with bins provided for cardboard containers, plastic cups and leftover scraps. The food scraps were transported to the garden's compost piles. Even the grounds from the coffee served will be put to good use, satisfying the tastes of acid-loving plants in the institution's gardens.

As GreenCityBlueLake Institute's David Beach summed up at day's close: "Tough but beautiful" can also be applied to Cleveland. ... Every day there are a thousand decisions to be made... decisions of hope or despair... We want to encourage each other to be people of hope."

GET HELP

Access free information from experts at area non-profits, hire local sustainability pros and find sustainable products and plants:

Cleveland Botanical Garden
www.cbgbgarden.org
 216-721-1600

Nature Center at Shaker Lakes
www.shakerlakes.org
 216-321-5935

Cleveland Museum of Natural History's
 GreenCityBlueLake Institute
www.gcbli.org
 216-231-4600

The Holden Arboretum
www.holdenarb.org
 440-946-4400

Biodiversity Alliance
www.biodiversityalliance.org
 216-707-2826
 The Ohio State University Extension
<http://extension.osu.edu/>

Cuyahoga Soil and Water
 Conservation District
www.cuyahogawcd.org
 216-524-6580

National Wildlife Federation
 Backyard Habitat
www.nwf.org/backyard/
 800-822-9919

Sustainable Landscaping LLC
www.sustainablelandscaping.net
 216-333-3937

Ohio Prairie Nursery Ltd.
 Located in Hiram, this nursery offers Ohio native seeds and plants for prairie, wetland and wildflower meadows. Staff members are available for consulting, installation and maintenance.
www.ohioprairienursery.com
 866-569-3380