

# The Native Plant Garden at Highland House, Montclair, New Jersey

Kazys Varnelis

varnelis.net

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*Tiarella cordifolia*, Allegheny Foamflower, is probably my most common native now. Why bother with exotics that are less interesting and have little benefit to our ecosystem?

Welcome to our native plant garden.

Since 2017, I have steadily converted our property into a thriving community of plants native to the Northeast. These plants sustain the local ecosystem, providing food and habitat for beneficial insects and wildlife. This project continues to evolve, and I regularly document my progress on my blog, [the Florilegium](https://varnelis.net/on-our-native-plant-garden/), dedicated to this garden, native plants, and

thoughtful landscape design. You are welcome to reach out to me [here](#). If you want to know more about native plants, I recommend the [Native Plant Society of New Jersey](#), of which I am currently president.

Choosing to garden exclusively with native plants—a few non-native trees and shrubs were already here when we moved in—is a design challenge. But I enjoy design challenges. My doctorate is in the history of architecture, and I taught for decades, most recently at Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (until 2016). My research explores how networks and the Internet reshape space and daily life, and my artwork has appeared at the New Museum, Museum of Modern Art, the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, and venues across North America and Europe (more on [me here](#)). While the native plant movement has a strong ecological and ethical foundation, it still lacks a compelling aesthetic. I aim to help create one, designing a domestic landscape that evokes the magic of the northeastern American forest while enhancing ecological health.

When we moved to [this property](#) in 2011, the landscape was severely degraded. Heavy equipment used during the house’s construction in 1981, followed by decades of leaf and twig removal coupled with misguided landscaping, had stripped away the top organic soil layer. What remained were patches of bare, heavily compacted subsoil interspersed with dense clusters of [invasive plants](#). Some invasives had been deliberately planted; others colonized naturally. Among these were [Garlic Mustard](#) (*Alliaria petiolata*), [English Ivy](#) (*Hedera helix*), [Japanese Pachysandra](#) (*Pachysandra terminalis*), [Periwinkle](#) (*Vinca minor*), [Burning Bush or Winged Euonymus](#) (*Euonymus alatus*), [Winter Creeper](#) (*Euonymus fortunei*), [Japanese Stiltgrass](#) (*Microstegium vimineum*), and [Forsythia](#) (*Forsythia x intermedia*). Three severe storms in our first two years—Hurricane Irene, the 2011 Halloween nor’easter, and Hurricane Sandy—made immediate cleanup essential.

In the wake of these storms, opportunistic tree services eager to maximize profits encouraged many homeowners in town to cut down healthy, mature trees. Ironically, isolated trees become far more vulnerable during storms, fully exposed to wind rather than buffered by surrounding vegetation. Ignorant of—or deliberately ignoring—basic ecology, these tree services increased risk for homeowners and further impoverished the already degraded landscapes, too often maintained by teams of so-called landscapers wielding destructive industrial machinery that effectively reduces plant diversity and soil health to a minimum. Despite being the “Garden State,” New Jersey often favors banal landscaping practices, described sharply by local garden blogger [Pat Sutton](#) as “neat as a pin, ugly as sin.” Homeowners frequently fall victim to landscapers who pave extensive portions of property, build needless hardscape, remove valuable trees and leaves, impoverish soil, and replace native species with invasive plants incongruous to our region. Stuck in perpetual cycles of costly

maintenance, homeowners rely increasingly on artificial interventions—dyed mulch and toxic herbicides like Round-Up—that compound rather than alleviate ecological damage. I didn't want to participate in this cycle, but didn't yet know what to do. Among architects, ignorance about landscape is widespread, almost a point of pride.

Around this time, I discovered three books at our local public library: Ken Druse's *The New Shade Garden: Creating a Lush Oasis in the Age of Climate Change*, Rick Darke's *American Woodland Garden: Capturing the Spirit of the Deciduous Forest*, and Thomas Rainer and Claudia West's *Planting in a Post-Wild World*. From Druse, I learned how shade and evapotranspiration significantly cool their surroundings, essential knowledge as global warming accelerates—New Jersey is one of the fastest-warming states in the country. Recognizing that mature trees stabilize soil, moderate temperatures, and sustain wildlife, I prioritized careful pruning, maintenance, and strategic planting to preserve and rebuild our forest canopy. Darke's writings and beautiful photographs vividly recalled my childhood in the Berkshire Hills, exploring old-growth forests near the Ice Glen behind our house in Stockbridge, with their rich tapestry of trilliums, skunk cabbage, ferns, and mosses. The contrast between those vibrant woods and nearby Mills Reservation, degraded by unchecked deer populations and infested by invasives, is stark.



Polypody ferns or Rock Cap Ferns, *Polypodium virginianum* spill over a boulder in The Ice Glen, Stockbridge, Massachusetts

Rainer and West introduced the concept of “green mulch”—a dense layer of plants that collectively retain moisture, lower soil temperatures, and suppress weeds. I have used this strategy with considerable success, although green mulch takes time to establish, and progress in the roadside area suffered setbacks after Montclair Township repeatedly dug up portions of the garden in 2024 for no coherent reason. I saw this technique employed beautifully in Piet Oudolf’s Lurie Garden in Chicago and closer to home, James Golden at Federal Twist in Hunterdon County, both of which impressed me when I visited them in 2021. However, Rainer and West frequently advocate incorporating non-native species, an approach I reject as unscientific and ecologically irresponsible. Predicting the future invasiveness or ecological impact of non-native plants is virtually impossible; species may remain benign for decades or even centuries before becoming invasive—the record for delayed invasiveness is 320 years. Instead, I set out to plant only natives, plants that have evolved to sustainably coexist within our local ecosystems.

Native plant gardens often appear unkempt and chaotic. Many gardeners have good intentions but lack formal design training, resulting in landscapes that fail to highlight the plants’ inherent beauty. Without a grasp of composition and spatial relationships, these gardens reinforce stereotypes of native landscapes as “weedy” and unattractive. Naturalistic

gardens overcome this challenge by integrating ecological function and intentional design. When properly executed, these gardens balance nature's wildness with structure, creating cohesive and aesthetically satisfying landscapes. Oudolf's Lurie Garden and Golden's Federal Twist showed me how naturalistic design and green mulch can succeed. Inspired by these examples, I developed my own green mulch layer for the woodland understory composed entirely of native species such as foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), trilliums (*Trillium* spp.), over a dozen species of ferns, May Apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), and Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), among others.

Layering plant communities, carefully considering the visual balance throughout the year, and choosing the right plants for each place ensures that my garden feels intentional, structured, and cohesive while remaining native. With the American chestnut lost to blight, we cannot reconstruct the ecosystem that existed here before Montclair was settled by Western European colonists. Though not natural, the garden can still be naturalistic, imitating patterns, textures, and ecological relationships found in nature. This kind of gardening was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through figures such as British gardener William Robinson, who pioneered the concept of "wild gardens," and Danish-American Jens Jensen, celebrated for integrating native plants into his Prairie-style designs. I also draw inspiration from entomologist and native plant advocate Doug Tallamy's idea of the "Homegrown National Park," an ecological vision in which individual homeowners transform their yards into vibrant, native habitats, creating an interconnected network of biodiversity. This aligns closely with my ethical goals, but Tallamy's phrase also suggests that a garden of native plants should evoke the experience of *living* within a national park, not a sparse landscape of isolated specimens but an abundance of plant life, botanical intensity, and ecological richness.

This is not an easy property to landscape. It measures 150 feet deep and drops 50 feet from front to back, a precipitous and challenging slope to landscape. Our house, at least, is well adapted for this site, although unfortunately, sited in the middle of the property due to the NIMBYist zoning ordinances of the time. Built in 1981, it is a Deck House designed by the Massachusetts firm of that name. Typically constructed on sloping sites, Deck Houses represent a modernist evolution of the New England aesthetic, employing natural materials such as mahogany and cedar and expansive glass windows that embrace the surrounding landscape. The landscape design complements and contrasts with this structure, following the approach of notable midcentury landscapes—such as at Walter Gropius's own house in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The geometry of the home is balanced by the naturalistic plantings.



By the road, the property takes on the look of a woodland edge. Although previous owners removed young trees with wanton abandon, I have let native trees reproduce themselves while also planting others absent from the present canopy. At the north edge, a stand of young tulip poplars that self-seeded is providing a screen for the house and will soon provide a layer

of shade. Oaks have also begun to appear, and although they are slower growing, these will be the giants of the future forest, assuming that future owners (or deer, storms, and disease) don't do something horrible to them.



As the canopy takes care of itself, I have largely planted only understory trees such as Eastern Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*), and Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*). Below them is a layer of bushes, among them native Rhododendrons (*Rhododendron maximum*), Mountain Laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), Possumhaw Viburnum (*Viburnum nudum*), Winterberry Holly (*Ilex verticillata*), Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), Serviceberry (*Amalanchier canadensis*), Chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*), Northern Bayberry (*Morella pensylvanica*), Pussywillow (*Salix discolor*), American Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), and Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). In turn, below those is a tapestry of native perennials, among them Sharp-lobed Hepatica (*Anemone acutiloba*), Canada Mayflower (*Anemone canadensis*), Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*), Marginal Wood Fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*), Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), Alumroot (*Heuchera americana*), Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*), Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis*), Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*), Allegheny Spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*), Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*), Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), Bracken Fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*), Wood Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*), and Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). All four of these layers—the forest canopy, the understory, bushes, and herbaceous perennials, together with annuals—provide visual interest throughout the year as well as providing incalculable functional benefits to the ecosystem. Already after just a few years, I've noticed that not only does leaving the leaves in place lead to richer soil, the plants themselves carve up the heavy subsoil below, making it easier for me to add to, or edit, the selection as I wish. Nor am I kidding myself; I sent soil from that area to the Rutgers Soil Testing Laboratory, and it has very high amounts of organic matter and optimum or above optimum levels of macronutrients. Moreover, the soil is acidic, which is what forest plants expect.

In gardening, as in architecture, limitations foster creativity. By committing exclusively to native plants, I've embraced ecological and aesthetic constraints to create a landscape that is functional, resilient, and beautiful. My aim is to demonstrate how ecological principles and intentional design can harmonize, challenging both the notion that suburban gardens must be formal and rigidly controlled and the stereotype that native plant gardens are inherently messy or unattractive. A thoughtfully designed native plant garden is more than ecological restoration; it is an evolving dialogue connecting people, plants, and place. It can mean living within your own homegrown national park—and who wouldn't want that?

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