

We Go Gardening

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This article is reprinted from the Native Garden News email newsletter with the permission of the author, Trish Beckjord. Billie Childress spotted this article and obtained permission for us to include it with our newsletter. This is being included as a bonus for our members who receive the newsletter via email.



A Short Study on Designing with Native Plants: Order & Coherence by Trish Beckjord, RLA

Winter is a time that allows you to take stock of the form and structure of your garden. How would you describe yours? Does it have a form or underlying structure? Is it ordered in some way? Is there a pattern to it or is it more a random assemblage of plants?

It turns out that order and coherence are among the most important organizing features in the garden. When present, the garden is understandable to the viewer. When it is not, a garden can often be interpreted as unattractive.

Personally, I think the issue of order and coherence is one of the primary reasons the reaction to the idea of a native garden by someone who does not know natives is immediately negative. How many times have you heard, or even thought yourself, “messy”, with an accompanying scowl when someone mentions natives?



Image: The native prairie planting around this house is attractive to some but sends others running who see it as messy and lacking coherence.

The University of Florida Extension, in Basic Principles of Landscape Design, states, “People feel more psychologically comfortable in a landscape that has order and repetition. Organized landscapes with predictable patterns (signs of human care) are easier to read and tend to make people feel at ease...”.

This recognizes the early work of Professor Joan Nassauer, Professor of Landscape Architecture at The University of Michigan, that recognized that our visual landscape preferences are culturally ingrained and significantly influence our perceptions of our gardens. In her 1995 publication, *Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames*, Nassauer described early in the native landscaping movement that evidence of intention, what she came to call “cues to care,” were significantly important to the acceptance of a native landscape.

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What remains true today is the fact that, as Nassauer points out, a negative response or hesitation to including native plants in a home garden is the ingrained sentiment that the way a home landscape looks reflects on the homeowner and is strongly connected to the idea of what is “proper.” As Nassauer writes, “...we must design to frame ecological function within a recognizable system of form...”

Image: (Pat Hill's Natural Midwest Garden) This mature native garden still shows attention to massing, groups of individual species and plant height; all elements contributing to a visual coherence in a small garden.

The need to frame a native garden in a recognizable system of form involves using design strategies and ingrained cultural norms such as neatness and other visual cues that show the garden is cared for. Knowing that people tend to interpret gardens that include a broad diversity of plants as messy helps us understand how to begin to fit a native garden into widely-held cultural criteria of the “proper” appearance of the “garden.”



Image: (Lake County, IL) This planting has kept the taller native species as an accent group at the end of swale. Mixing this throughout the length of the garden would have created a wilder, less coherent look.

For those interested in learning more about native plants, we recommend learning from nature. Get out and observe! Notice what plants associate together in the prairie, in the savanna, in the woodland and at the river edge. And there is sense in this. When you take what you have learned in the field back to the garden, you will know to not plant bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) in full sun or Prairie Dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*) in the shade. You will understand that it makes more sense to plant Woodland Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) with Rosy Sedge (*Carex rosea*) than with Fox Sedge (*Carex vulpinoidea*). But, observing and learning from nature does not help you learn how to order the garden with native plants so it produces a pleasing view that is coherent and readable.

Design theory talks about concepts such as mass, line, form, repetition, proportion and color and how they are arranged to create unity, harmony, contrast, pattern, rhythm and balance. It does not take ecological associations into consideration. And when we plant ecologically, often we tend to want to mimic what we see in nature – a randomly-associated mix of species. This loses visual

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coherence at the garden scale. Take this and throw in random height (with a number of native species growing taller than 3-4' and the untrained eye will see chaos. If we want to expand the number of native gardens and build corridor connections, we need to understand, appreciate and find ways to respond to these concerns.

Image Courtesy of GrowNative.org: This new planting, which will grow together over time, clearly shows organization of individual species, repetition and rhythm. Their use helps bring order and coherence to the native garden. The curvilinear path is also a bold ordering element that invites the viewer into this garden.

Understanding order in a native landscape makes it easier for a viewer to see pattern and understand what the eye sees at this larger scale. But, as Nassauer writes, this is a coarse filter. In her research farmers saw beauty in neatly mown edges and straight rows uninterrupted by weeds or anything else that would add a “messy” element to the view. However, reading the landscape and understanding its order is reading at a scale that is larger than the residential garden. And translating it down to the garden/plant species level can be challenging.

So what are you doing that helps bring order and coherence to your native garden? When we seed a prairie, or plant our garden randomly trying to imitate nature and without consideration of size, proportion, texture or organization of the species we are including, we remove elements that can help the uninitiated feel that they understand – feel comfortable - with what they are seeing. Some of us may love the look of a prairie in our front or back yard, but the goal is not to bring everyone to appreciate that approach. How can we, who know and love native plants and gardens, become better at creating a native garden that is visually coherent and ordered to those we want to encourage to join us?



Image: This native garden at the Wild Ones National Headquarters shows consideration of form, mass and repetition and reads as a coherent, visually-pleasing garden.

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