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AUGUST 2018

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Shoring up biodiversity

Shoreline gardens can beautify while reinforcing the foundations of a healthy ecosystem

BY ANDREW HIND

A well-designed shoreline garden sponsors increased biodiversity, encouraging everything from insects to small mammals to birds, including wildfowl like Common Goldeneye ducks. (Photo courtesy of Ducks Unlimited Canada)

Many cottage owners removed the natural vegetation at the shoreline in an attempt to beautify their landscapes. It was only in recent years that we began to realize that this undermines the health of the natural environment.

Perfect, symmetrical lakeside flowerbeds overflowing with annuals and exotic perennials certainly get noticed by fellow cottagers as they troll by in their boats; blooms bumping up against other beautiful blooms in tidy rows are lovely. However, what's perhaps more likely to make these people drink in the natural beauty and pause is a lakeside tangle of beebalm, black-eyed Susans, Joe Pye weed, and wild lupines.

Don't imagine a garden that's just about flowers. Instead, think of it as a refuge for birds, bugs, reptiles and mammals. A well-designed shoreline garden is aesthetically pleasing and yet still supports biodiversity by satisfying animal instincts and reinforcing the foundations of a healthy ecosystem.

Such gardens are vital for maintaining the health of that natural setting that has been attracting us to cottage country for well over a century.

"The shoreline is the most sensitive landscape in our region, the meeting of land and water, of moose and fish. It's also the most developed landscape. That's a problem: if you damage the shoreline, and take any part of it away, it's like playing a game of Jenga – eventually the whole thing

will fall down," explains Leora Berman, COO and co-founder of The Land Between, a national charity working towards bioregionalism.

Unfortunately, lakeshores have undergone massive changes over the last century. Cottages have sprung up like trilliums in a springtime forest, and many cottage owners removed the natural vegetation at the shoreline in an attempt to beautify their landscapes. It was only in recent years that we began to realize that this undermines the health of the natural environment.

So, what role do shoreline gardens play?

Vegetation in this vital strip of land between the water and cottage provides critical habitat for a number of species including insects and the bats that feed upon them, nesting waterfowl and hungry songbirds, turtles and frogs, as well as small mammals such as voles. It helps protect water quality. It's also an important buffer to filter snow and water runoff, and it prevents soil erosion.

The Land Between is attempting to rebalance the scales, to encourage undoing some of the damage we've done, by hosting a number of Design Your Own Shoreline Garden seminars across cottage country,

including August stops in Haliburton and Huntsville (www.thelandbetween.ca/design-your-own-shoreline-garden).

"A well-designed shoreline garden is a compromise between the 'wild' and a 'formal' garden – beautiful, functional and natural," says Berman. "It can stop erosion, improve water quality, deter geese, attract pollinators, and support wildlife ... while still providing the appeal of blooms and floral scents."

Singing birds, splashing fish, croaking bullfrogs and fluttering butterflies add sensory sparkle to any shoreline garden. Wildlife quickly arrives when food, water, and shelter are available. Shoreline gardens provide habitat for frogs to thrive in, while the presence of tadpoles in the nearby lake will attract fish. Dragonflies and their cousins, damselflies, set up housekeeping quickly when a shoreline garden arrives on the scene. They lay their eggs in the nearby water and, in the larval stage, eat aquatic insect larva and in turn are food for fish. Cover provided by dense plants and shrubs provide wildlife with shelter from predators and the elements. Berry-laden shrubs supply a juicy feast for songbirds, while nectar-laden blooms romance bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.



The thin strip of land between the water's edge and your cottage is the most prized real estate on your property, as well as the most vulnerable. When planting a garden there, aim for one that restores biodiversity as well as being attractive to look at. (Photo courtesy of Leora Berman, The Land Between)



Often considered a roadside weed, Joe Pye weed is in fact an exotic looking native flower. Flourishing in moist soil, it's ideal for shoreline gardens. (Photos by Kathy Wood)



Jack-in-the-pulpit is a denizen of moist deciduous woods and, as such, require similar conditions in your garden. Watch for clusters of red berries that appear late in the summer. (Photos by Kathy Wood)



The best plants for a shoreline garden are native plants, such as goldenrod, which have developed in tandem with cottage country's fauna. The best part about goldenrod is it requires no care whatsoever. (Photos by Kathy Wood)



The Land Between hosts this summer, offering resources for property owners wishing to design responsible shoreline gardens.

(Photo courtesy of Leora Berman, The Land Between)



Ferns offer interesting texture and verdant green colour, as well as cover for all manner of wildlife species.

(Photo by Kathy Wood)

While many cottagers are tempted to use the same nursery-purchased plants that grace their home gardens, it's ideal instead to use native plants. "Native plants are hardier and require less work, but more importantly, pollinators are not attracted to non-native plant species," Berman explains. "Native species and wildlife have developed hand-in-hand and are dependent upon one another." Sourcing native plants from specialty nurseries can be more difficult and expensive than the more common plants we find in garden centres, but the rewards are well worth the effort.

Whatever plants you select, it's important to protect them for a few years until they mature and harden themselves. Shorelines are often subjected to strong winter winds and wind chill, so anything planted there should be mulched (cedar mulch or even shredded leaves are fine) to protect vulnerable young roots.

For some cottagers, especially those without a green thumb, the task of planning and implementing a shoreline garden can be daunting – even if they embrace the necessity of establishing such spaces, the perceived difficulty might turn people off. That's where The Land Between's Shoreline Gardens workshops comes in. These workshops brush aside the perception that shoreline gardens need to be difficult and costly by touching on all the important bases, everything from plant selection and design to aesthetics, limiting nutrient runoff and erosion, and even geese control. Better yet, bring photos of your shoreline and experts will assist in designing a space tailored especially for your shore.

The shoreline is the most beloved part of most cottage properties. It's also the most vulnerable. A well-designed shoreline garden enhances natural beauty while also supporting biodiversity.

Design Your own Shoreline Garden workshops will be held on Saturday, Aug. 11 at the Haliburton Highlands Outdoors Association, 6712 Gelert Rd, Haliburton between 10 a.m. and noon, and on Saturday, Aug. 25 at the Huntsville Public Library in the Annex Room, between 10 a.m. and noon. Learn from the experts and walk away with a custom garden design for your shoreline. Register at www.shorelinegardens.ca. The cost is \$20 per person.