



Geeks and Gardeners Unite to Save Water

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Winter is a good season to plan water-saving strategies for your yard. Suzanne reports on Susan Munger's native designs at East Lyme's Hole in the Wall Beach demonstration project...

This may seem like an odd season to think about water-saving landscaping ideas, but it's a good time to take stock of our environs and make plans for next year.

Heed the advice of Susan Munger, local garden writer and horticultural consultant: "People should use the winter to look at their property, notice where the rain and snow collect, where they linger longer," says Munger, who is also the UConn Cooperative Extension Service's master gardener coordinator for New London County. Moisture pockets are signs of good sites for certain plants.

For the past few years, Munger has been working on landscaping around the Town of East Lyme's Hole in the Wall Beach Outdoor Stormwater Classroom. People may think it's just a new beach house and funky paving surfaces next to the Niantic Bay Boardwalk, but it's worth more than a pit stop. Check out the educational signs and real-time weather and stormwater monitoring system, and plants.

The collaboration, funded by a Small Town Economic Assistance Program grant, shows how we can reduce runoff of pollutants into the Long Island Sound. What I like about this set-up is that it brings the geeks - people who get into roadways, paving systems, and storm drains - together with gardeners to solve a problem that confronts us all: how to reduce our footprint on the natural environment that we love to live right next to, or on top of.

Munger and Bill Scheer, East Lyme town engineer, recently spoke at the East Lyme Public Library about the engineering feats of the stormwater catch basin, multiple pervious paving systems on display, and landscaping around the parking area.

Munger's goal is to show how some native plants perform in a challenging setting, not unlike our yards. This is to give homeowners ideas and encouragement for venturing beyond the usual collection of introduced shrubs and flowers that may look showy, but are just too high maintenance and depend on too much water, fertilizer, and bug sprays. Overuse of these inputs isn't good for the quality and supply of our water, us, or the natural environment.

The soil at the site is sandy, doesn't have a lot of organic matter, and has been heavily compacted, if not by prehistoric glaciers, by humans. Perimeter trees create dry shade pockets; other spots get a lot of direct sun. Being close to the Sound, it can be a high moisture area at times, thanks to a nor-easter or two, and it's in a salt air environment, Munger points out. And there's foot traffic.

Munger took her inspiration from native coastal areas, Bluff Point and the Barn Island nature walk in Groton, where she also found helpful signage. She encourages people to get out and enjoy these and other nature walks for ideas, as well as fresh air.

Over the past two years, close to 30 different native plants, or their cultivars, have been planted in the East Lyme project, along with a few non-native species. Munger is pleased to report that most have weathered the extremes of a wet spring and summer (remember 2009?) and this summer's late heat and lack of rainfall.

It wasn't difficult for Munger to find native plants from Connecticut wholesalers, which means we just need to ask our local independent garden centers and nurseries for more of these plants.

Here are few of her favorite natives at the site:

Sweet fern, *Comptonia peregrina*, is a low-spreading ground cover, about 18 inches tall, with a nice spring fragrance. Not really a fern, its foliage is tougher. The plant, which thrives in low-nutrient soils, will spread enough to choke out weeds.

Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, is a native grass that Munger says will grow in a variety of soils, especially dry and infertile; the blue-green blades of summer give way to rusty color and some white seedheads in the fall.

For some interesting flowers on upright plants, try Turtlehead, *Chelone glabra*, a robust perennial that can get up to 4 feet tall. It is named after its white flowers. Monkshood, *Aconitum carmichaelli*, is a member of the buttercup family, with blue flowers. Also known as Wolfbane, the plant and flowers are poisonous.

The East Lyme site is a tough spot for high bush blue berries, so Munger's choices include red chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia*, which UConn recommends as a fine native alternative to the ubiquitous and invasive burning bush *Euonymus*. Bayberry, *Myrica pensylvanica*, the North-American coastal native used in soaps and candles, require at least one male plant mixed in with the females to produce the namesake berries.

"Even though a lot of our native shrubs are not as showy as the exotics, they do bring in the birds and butterflies," said Munger, "and that's important, too."

For more information about East Lyme's Hole in the Wall project, go to www.eltownhall.com/hole-in-the-wall, or contact Bill Scheer at (860) 739-6931. For more information about the plantings, contact Susan at shmunger@sbcglobal.net.

For more water saving and pollution prevention ideas, see Suzanne's Sound Decisions website at www.savetheriver-savethehills.org/sound-decisions.