



Jessica Thompson

Recreative Natives, one woman's passion for environment

Story by Elaine Hobson Miller
Photos by Graham Hadley



She glides through her weedless gardens with the grace of a gazelle, calling each flower by name. She pauses to stroke the back of a fuzzy bumblebee that is feasting on swamp milkweed, the bee ignoring the fact that a human has just touched it. Butterflies flit between her and the purple coneflowers, barely acknowledging her gentle presence. It's as if they know she is their mistress, the planter of the food sources they so eagerly seek.

These are the gardens of Jessica Thompson, whose property around her Logan Martin Lake home is covered in flowers that she never has to water or fertilize. Some of them so rare that they are found in only one or two places outside private gardens. Her secret? She plants species that are native to Alabama. They don't need extra moisture between rainfalls, and they've adapted to our soil.

Jessica and her husband, Scott, live on Rabbit Branch. Their property was all lawn when they moved there from Atlanta two years ago. A month after their arrival, Jessica smothered the lawns with leaves, which suppressed all but the aggressive turf grasses. "I had to dig them out," she says. As the grasses died, she started expanding, and now, almost all 2.6 acres are covered in native plants and flowers.

"I was attempting 100% natives in my landscape, but I couldn't find many of them," she says. "The nearest native nursery is in Fayetteville, Ga., or you have to order them online."

She started growing them herself from seeds, and soon had an excess. So, she began selling them. That led to her business, Recreative Natives. Word-of-mouth and a Facebook page brought so many customers, she soon sold out of her stock. "I wish I had grown more," she says.

Native plants take one to two cold stratifications (winters) to germinate. But she learned how to trick them by using a refrigerator so they would germinate in four to six months. Once her gardens started blooming, she knew she could not go back to traditional landscaping.

Home again

Jessica grew up in Cropwell, and her mother lives just four miles from her. She gardened with her grandmother as a child, but it took her years to realize someone could make a career of that. While living in Atlanta, she decided to go back to school and study horticulture at the University of Georgia. She became a landscape designer. Then in 2014, she read a book that would change her trajectory and give her a mission in life.

"I read *Bringing Nature Home* by Doug Tallamy, an entomologist who says it's up to backyard gardeners to save our native insects," she says. "The reason that's so important is because it goes up the food chain from birds to carnivores. He said private-property homeowners have more acreage than all national and state parks combined, which puts them in a unique position to help the ecology and nature or bio-diversity." She began incorporating native plants in the gardens she designed, slowly phasing out of traditional landscaping and into habitat restoration.

"At first, I would sneak a few natives into my designs, but then I became more open and tried to convince homeowners to plant 70% natives," she says. "That spiraled by word of mouth, and I went totally into designing backyard wildlife habitats, many of them for people who wanted to get wildlife certifications." She started turning down folks who did not want to include 30% to 70% natives. "I got pretty snobby about it," she admits.

Despite her formal education in horticulture, Jessica is largely self-taught when it comes to natives. "I've done lots of Googling and studying range maps," she says. "Alabama has a really good website owned by the Alabama Herbarium Consortium and the University of West Alabama called floraofalabama.org, which maintains an Alabama Plant Atlas. It's good for pinpointing the counties where natives grow."

Walking through her yard is like walking through a fairyland filled with flowers and the many types of insects that

feed on them. She has an edible section that includes some herbs and plants that aren't native, such as basil, tomatoes, peppers, sage and squash. It's modeled after a French potager (meaning "soup pot") garden that usually includes a structure in the center and mixing veggies with flowers. Her structure is a metal gazebo.

Her edibles include a couple of "sacrificial" tomato plants, where she moves the occasional tomato or tobacco hornworm to keep it off the plants she wants to harvest for her kitchen. "I also have a patch of horse nettles I move them to," she says. "It's their native host plant."

Past the edible garden is a metal arch covered with crossvine, which leads to a short but winding path of pine bark bordered by bits and pieces of tree limbs. "I laid that to recreate a forest floor. Everything growing in this area would grow in a deep forest," she says. In the midst of this forest setting is a sitting area placed over a septic tank so it can be moved aside easily when the tank gets cleaned out periodically. Along the path is a small Eastern hemlock that seems incongruous in her lively grounds because of its loose-branching limbs. "It's my Charlie Brown tree," she says.

Despite its appearance, it's a very healthy 40-year-old tree, and probably the most expensive purchase for her yard because of its scarcity. "The entire East Coast of the United States and Canada is losing the Eastern hemlock to woolly adelgids, an imported pest that resembles aphids, she says. "It will become extinct in my lifetime. Mine will likely make it as a single tree and not a stand, and because it's in a simulated habitat."

The path also winds among a patch of native *Hydrangea aborensces* (commonly known as wild, smooth or nine bark hydrangea). "Most people think the oak leaf is the only hydrangea native to Alabama, but that's not true," she says.

The area contains a few non-natives, such as hostas, and a cast iron plant, in tribute to her husband. "I tried to recreate a design that incorporated his favorites," she says. "He likes the moonvines and lenten roses, which I have in a pot. I still have 98% natives here, but if I keep him happy, he digs holes for me." On the peninsula that ends at their neighbor's pier, Jessica maintains what she calls her "Flood Plain Garden," because everything planted there can go under water when Alabama Power opens the dam and floods the area. "This is an experimental area and a man-made environment," she says. "I'm still doing trial and error here."

This is where she planted flag or Louisiana iris, swamp mallow (hibiscus family), bee balm, garden phlox, Michigan lilies, salvia, cabbage leaf coneflowers and wild indigo. "The cabbage leaf coneflowers are native to Mississippi or perhaps West Alabama, but they aren't documented in Alabama," she says. "You can crush the indigo to make ink or dye."

The swamp mallow closes after blooming for one day, and she stops to open one so a visitor can see the bees sleeping off their nectar drunk. She also has swamp milkweed, a host for



monarch butterflies. "They do not drink the nectar but lay eggs on its leaves," she says. "The bees love it for its nectar."

She pauses at the coreopsis to pet a bumblebee, literally stroking it with her index finger. It's something she shows the home-schooled children when she gives them tours. She has never been stung by a bee. "They don't sting you, they just try to shoo you away," she says. She planted ironweed and swamp sunflowers because they have varied bloom times, enabling the bees to eat all year. Monarchs and skippers swarm around her as she tramps through plants looking for black swallowtail caterpillars. "It's my favorite thing to do," she says.

"I have a borderline unhealthy obsession. I would spend every waking hour here if I could. In fact, it's hard to go away for more than a couple of days because I can't wait to get back to my gardens."

Bees, butterflies and birds

While she walks freely among the bees and butterflies, she has quit feeding the birds at man-made feeders. "By now (mid-July) they are nesting and feeding their babies, and they feed them exclusively on caterpillars and insects," she says. Also, there's a mysterious virus going around at bird feeders, and she doesn't want to spread it. "It started in (Washington) D.C., and it's moving southeast," she says. "It has been found in Tennessee. Luckily, growing natives helps the birds. They feed from the plants, eating their seeds and berries and the insects that feed on them."

Her busiest plant, however, is the clustered mountain mint. Stand near it long enough, and you'll see 30





Landscaped shoreline



Greenhouse



Hydrangea



Bee



different species of insects, including carpenter bees, honey bees, thread wasps, dirt daubers, banded wasps, silver-spotted skippers and buckeye butterflies. “When they’re buzzing around you, they are just checking you out,” she says. “Make them scatter, and they come right back. They are single-minded.”

Continuing the garden tour, Jessica points out a coral honeysuckle, a native plant that she sold out of during her first day of business last spring. She pauses to watch a carpenter bee work its way around the straw-colored stamens of a passion vine, a purple flower that looks more like it was crocheted than grown. As he drank from the nectaries, the bee was bumping the stamens and getting pollen on his back, which is how pollen is spread. Nearby, other bees and insects feasted on a yellow giant hyssop and a royal catchfly, the latter a threatened species in Alabama and an endangered one in four other states.

Jessica says Alabama is unique with 28 endemic plant species. “Georgia has 11 and Maine only one,” she points out. “Endemic means it doesn’t grow anywhere else. What makes Alabama unique is its varied regions. We have the Appalachian mountain chain, the Piedmont region, the Gulf Coast and the limestone over in Bibb County. The Cahaba River and its limestone bluffs create three ecological regions that have 10-15 of those native plants.”

She has sown some Alabama leather flowers (*Clematis socialis*), a creeper whose population has been reduced to just three locations, with two of those in St. Clair County and one in Georgia. “The Coosa Plains used to be along the Coosa River, but it’s all forests now,” she says. “These plains were grassland prairies that stretched from Rome, Ga., to Coosa County, Ala. The flooding of the Coosa (to create dams for hydroelectric power) was the largest ecological disaster in U.S. history from the standpoint of extinction, because we lost more plants, animals, fish and clams to this than to anything else.”

The loss of plant species is still undocumented, she says. No one knows for certain what was lost, because they don’t know what was there, except for remnants left behind like the Alabama leather flower and the one population of Cahaba lily on Logan Martin Lake. “Botanists at Auburn University and Davis Arboretum are trying to go back and document the lost plant species based off 100-year-old plant specimens. They have also asked for anyone who has a picture of a plant species from before the damming of the Coosa, even if in the background of a photo, to please send it to them.” (See sidebar for address.)

The St. Clair County locations include one plant in a ditch on the side of the road that the city of Ashville knows not to spray or mow. “It’s a creeper, not a vine,” Jessica says. She does volunteer work for the Nature Conservancy as well as for Birmingham Botanical Gardens in their efforts to save native plants. Alabama Power is contributing to these efforts, too.

One of those natives is the Porter’s goldenrod, which became extinct in



Alabama in 2003. Jessica has germinated 13 of them and still has four in her gardens. “A friend of mine is a forester and found some in Hartselle, and documented them, but they were on private property and the property owner destroyed them,” she says. “I have a lot of natives that are expired but live on through cultivation or simulated habitat.”

Back near her patio, hummingbirds come up to the Turk’s cap mallow (hibiscus family) and the woodland sunflowers, but they get the most aggressive at the native honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*).

Jessica rarely sits and relaxes in her garden because she can’t stay still long enough. She’s always planting, pruning or picking. Although she doesn’t spend time watering or fertilizing her natives, occasionally she’ll use a bit of compost. “But I make my own compost tea,” she says.

Ironically, while she does not believe in chemicals in gardens, she slathers insect repellents containing DEET on herself when entertaining friends on the patio because gnats, mosquitoes and other biting insects seem to love the taste of her skin.

“I’ve never been a religious person, but now I am more spiritual from seeing my connection to nature,” she says.

“I’m on a mission. I want to get these native plants into traditional gardens. Once people see them, they love them.”



RESOURCES

If you want to further explore natives, Jessica suggests the following websites:

gardenia.net/native-plants/alabama

wildflower.org/collections/collection.php?collection=AL

floraofalabama.org

southeasternflora.com

wildflower.org/plants-main

missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder/plantfindersearch.aspx

Note: You can send photos of plant specimens from before the damming of the Coosa to Patrick Thompson, Arboretum Specialist, at thomppg@auburn.edu or by ‘snail mail’ to the College of Sciences and Mathematics, Donald E. Davis Arboretum, 101 Rouse Life Sciences Building, Auburn, AL 36849.)

Why plant natives?

While people have been planting natives for many years, it has become more popular in the past decade, according to Jessica Thompson. But by choosing natives for your landscape, you are not only helping wildlife but creating a healthier world in which to live. Here are some of the benefits of planting native gardens:

1. Ecological services. You help feed insects and birds, which spread pollen and feed critters on up the food chain.
2. Water runoff and filtration. Trees, shrubs and perennials filter 80% of our runoff. Turf lawns only filter about 20%. “Logan Martin Lake tests high for E. coli. I have a theory that it’s due to cutting down trees and making more lawns and walking paths,” she says. “We’ve cut off our water filter.”
3. Water conservation. “I don’t have an irrigation system. I never water my natives gardens. I let rainfall do it. Even in droughts I don’t water them. They perform so much better that way.”
4. Less maintenance and less soil amendments. “They have evolved to grow in our rocky clay. They don’t need peat and topsoil added. Peat is a non-renewable resource. Most of our peat is only available from Ireland, Scotland and Canada. When those old bogs are gone, they’re gone.”
5. Better for the climate. “Natives are more effective at sequestering (taking from the air) and storing carbon long term.”
6. Healthier places for people. “Lawns and traditional gardens are notorious for requiring pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides. Lawns on average have 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre than farmland.”



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