

Landscapes Like Mother Nature Grows

I can't count the number of times I have heard someone say they want to make their landscape "look natural" only to then describe their view of a "natural" landscape or show me a picture or invite me to come see for myself and it turns out to be, in my opinion, anything but natural.

To many people, their ideal landscape would be something that resembles a golf course or city park, with a few scattered large trees and large expanses of closely mowed lawn. Some folks would add a perennial or flower bed here and there for color. Apparently, these landscapes are more appealing to many people than anything I would consider "natural".

So what would a truly natural landscape look like? To get an idea, go to any of the state parks in the Hill Country and take a hike on one of the trails, far enough from the headquarters or parking lots to see unaltered native vegetation growing naturally. Or visit the Kerr Wildlife Management Area west of Hunt or any other well-managed (not overgrazed) ranch in the area. You will find that none of these places remotely resemble a golf course or a typical suburban lawn.

So what would those places look like? For starters, most natural areas would have a much greater diversity of plant species than your average suburban lot—more different species of grasses with wildflowers and other forbs intermixed with the grasses, small shrubs and vines arranged in a random fashion, some under trees and some in the open, and finally, different species of trees of different ages and sizes, again arranged randomly.

There would likely be some dead branches or limbs laying about and possibly a dead tree here and there. Some of the area would likely be open enough to allow you to walk around easily, but there would be areas where the density of the vegetation would require you to walk around some shrubs, small trees or vines or maybe duck under some limbs. Mother Nature doesn't plant things evenly spaced or in rows, but rather randomly, which means sometimes different species of plants are growing intertwined together.

Now the kind of natural area I have just described would not be too conducive to a game of volleyball or touch football or Frisbee or the like, and if that is the kind of activity you expect to have on your lawn, then a "natural" landscape may not be for you, or at least not for your whole property. Everyone has the right to the kind of landscape they prefer. But it is important that people understand the differences between a "natural" landscape and a "suburban lawn" type of landscape.

Suburban lawns made up of non-native turf grasses require many times the amount of water that native grasses do, and the latter do not require any fertilizer and only very infrequent mowing. Non-native turf grasses are not nearly as good at capturing rainwater and maintaining and building healthy soil as are mixtures of native grasses, and they are certainly not as healthy a habitat for birds and butterflies as are native grasses.

Something that is missing from truly natural landscapes but is too often found in abundance in many yards is the presence of exotic vegetation. From St Augustine or bermudagrass lawns to ligustrum, chinaberry and tree of heaven, these exotic, and in many cases invasive, species contribute to the degradation of the local native habitat and substitution of a non-native one, to the detriment of most native wildlife and native vegetation.

Unfortunately, the interest people have in growing exotic plants is not new. Henry Ford imported and planted a Baobab tree from Africa on his property in Ft. Myers, Florida over 100 years ago!

We are losing native habitat to “development” at an alarming rate, so, for those of us concerned about this, planting native plants to try to maintain a native Hill Country habitat and a gene pool of native plants is one way to help prevent this loss. The least we can do is to try to minimize our impact on the landscape by doing what we can to conserve any natural areas we have and to try to mimic natural areas as much as possible in our choice of plantings around our homes. And avoid all non-native plants.

Until next time...

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