Gardening with intent

Five years ago, Joy Stewart and her husband began killing their lawn. There was no malice in the deed, but there was forethought aplenty. And this wasn’t their first time. They’d done it all before, in Wisconsin, back in ’94.

Stewart knew neighbors would be wary of the suspicious activity. So to keep the peace, she put up the sign right out in front for everybody to see. She laid out their scheme in black and white and put fliers in an info tube she’d planted right next to the “got questions?” sign.

The result is enough to convince even the most dubious observer that there was, indeed, method to the madness on Springfield Drive. The method involves French drains, ponds, rain barrels and a 100-foot rock creek bed that route rain and snow melt to multi-tiered gardens filled with water-loving native plants that keep rich topsoil nutrients and wash out of the storm sewers and in the gardens where they belong. “It takes a heck of a rain to wash it away now,” Stewart said.

When they moved into a quiet Bristol neighborhood in 2006, Stewart and husband Larry Hassanmann were on the run from the brutal upper Midwest winters, searching for a milder climate.

It didn’t take long to realize they’d have to do something about the sloping plot of clay they were sitting on. The runoff was intense and mowing was a treacherous, five-hour ordeal. So they systematically began destroying every weed and blade of grass.

Instead of endless hours of mowing and weed extraction, the couple spends an hour here and there tidying up their wildflower gardens, shady spots and paths.

“That’s because the plants are in control,” Stewart said. “The natives are very competitive with weeds. But, it takes about three years for the native plants to gain control.”

Giving the native plants the chance to claim their turf took a lot of work on the front end. The couple did it all themselves, except for digging out the 30-inch-deep pond that’s home to 40-some goldfish. They let a backhoe do that job. They chose goldfish, instead of the popular koi, Stewart said, “because koi eat everything and you can’t have water plants with koi around.”

One member of the goldfish school is a 10-year-old whopper named Peppermint Pat.

Stewart scours books and websites searching for native plants that thrive in wet environments. Almost all the plants — about 90 percent — in the ever-evolving gardens start from seeds she nurtures over the winter.

Stewart has certification in rain garden design from South Carolina Extension Service and is working with the Tennessee Yards and Neighborhoods program, a partnership between the University of Tennessee Extension, the Tennessee Water Resources Research Center at UT and TVA. TYN advises people on “how to maintain a beautiful, hardy landscape while conserving and protecting the water supply.”

The traditional yard is costly, TYN advises on its website. Besides the amount of time and labor you spend maintaining your yard, you’re using:

- Water for irrigation.
- Expensive pesticides that can be toxic to people, pets and wildlife.
- Costly fertilizers that can harm aquatic wildlife if misapplied.
- Gasoline for lawn-care equipment.

“Having eight-tenths of an acre of lawn was just insane,” Stewart said. “Nature doesn’t work that way.”

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