

Book Review

***Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants*, Douglas W. Tallamy, 2009**

Sometimes you read a book that addresses something you already knew, but does it in a way that radically opens your mind to the depth and importance of the issue. Tallamy's book, ***Bringing Nature Home*** is one such book.

I'm a landscape architect, a real plantophile, and have been a strong proponent of native plants for years. So what is it about this book that has captured my imagination and interest so completely that I urge everyone of you to read it? Three reasons. First, his discussion of the interactions of plants, insects and other species is clear, cogent and fascinating. Second, he asserts that we – you and me — can undo much of the environmental damage we have inflicted on the land while doing our gardening. And third, it is critical work to do. Tallamy says, *[m]y central message is that unless we restore native plants to our suburban [urban] ecosystems, the future of biodiversity in the United States is dim.*

The book is divided into several themes starting with the argument about why *[p]lants are not optional on this planet*. Plants, as we know, serve as food for the rest of the living beings on this planet, the first trophic level. He reminds us that if nobody eats your plants, that they are useless and contribute nothing to the life. So all those plants we put in our gardens because they are insect resistant are, in truth, the problem.

His book is full of statistics and information that can be startling: *we have taken and modified for our own use between 95 and 97 percent of all land in the lower 48 states . . . we have paved at least 4 million linear miles of public roads . . . we have converted between 32 and 40 million acres to suburban lawns in this country . . . an area more than eight times the size of New Jersey dedicated to alien grasses*. And the lawns produce nothing (except Japanese Beetles), demand resources, contribute to pollution and so on.

The second part of the book addresses the issue that *[a]ll plants are not created equal*. He has a great discussion of why biodiversity is critical, why invasive plants don't feed our native animals and why this is important. His discussion about what is 'native' is one of the best I have read, and makes clear the cost of using species 'not from here' in our yards. Again, his book is rich in data and compares the contribution of alien and native species. He even addresses our love affair with exotics and aliens and how much this has costs us. Tallamy is an entomologist and shares his obvious love and appreciation of insects, reminding

us that *[i]nsects are worth billions*. Of the 4 million or so insect species on earth, *a mere 1 percent interact with humans in negative ways*. The rest ensure our survival on this planet.

The last part of the book has concrete suggestions of how we can make the transition in our gardens and neighborhoods and what plants we can use. He challenges us to participate in stopping the on-going extinction of plants, insects, birds and other animals. ***We can no longer hope to coexist with other animals if we continue to wage war on their homes and food supplies.*** He urges us to practice what he calls *reconciliation ecology*, and to redesign our human habitat to accommodate other species. Remember, it is we who decide what plants will grow in our garden.

Tallamy argues that by increasing the percentage of native plants and biomass in our gardens, we can counter the extinction crisis and give plants and animals space and resilience to adapt to the climate changes that all will experience. ***As gardeners and stewards of our land, we have never been so empowered – and the ecological stakes have never been so high.***

Reviewed by Lynda Schneekloth, Chair, Sierra Club Niagara Group