Book suggests adding native plants to garden

By Brent Marsh
Master Gardener

Songbird populations have been declining for years. But gardeners, even those with small backyard flower gardens, can help by adding native plants. That's what University of Delaware professor Douglas W. Tallamy says in his book, "Bringing Nature Home."

The problem for the birds and other wildlife is loss of habitat. Many of our forests and meadows have been replaced by housing developments. But there's another problem too. Those of us who garden have often chosen flowers, shrubs, and trees that aren't native to our area, not even native to our continent. Without realizing it sometimes, we are choosing these plants, which Mr. Tallamy calls "alien exotics," because they are "pest-free." Insects don't like them. After all, who wants to plant something that the insects love to eat?

Well, this is where the birds come in. Some songbirds eat insects, spiders, and worms. And some songbirds eat seeds and fruit. But nearly all songbirds feed insects, etc., to their babies. And if our backyard gardens include only alien plants, there won't be any insects for those baby birds.

Why can't insects eat those alien plants in our gardens? Mr. Tallamy says there are three reasons. First, pest-free ornamentals are actually favored in the plant trade because insects don't eat them. They're the

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plants we can easily buy because they sell well. Second, our native insects have evolved to eat our own native plants, but not alien plants native to another continent. And third, many insects are "specialists," eating just a few or even one kind of native plant. Consider the monarch butterfly. Its caterpillars eat only milkweed leaves.

But wait, you say, I've got a butterfly bush in my backyard and the butterflies love it. Butterfly bushes, which are alien, do provide nectar for adult butterflies, but not a single kind of butterfly caterpillar can eat its leaves. Without native plants to "host" caterpillars, there can't be any butterflies.

So what do you do? What do you plant? First, plant native trees if you don't have them. Our own native oak trees can support more than 500 different species of butterflies and moths. Many of them are small insects we hardly notice, but they're excellent and plentiful food for songbird babies.

As for flowers, try black-eyed Susans, meadow phlox, and any of a number of native asters. Or, if you're brave, plant goldenrod. It supports more than 100 kinds of butterflies and moths. But most importantly, add those native plants that you like. Because more and more gardeners are interested in native plants, many garden centers
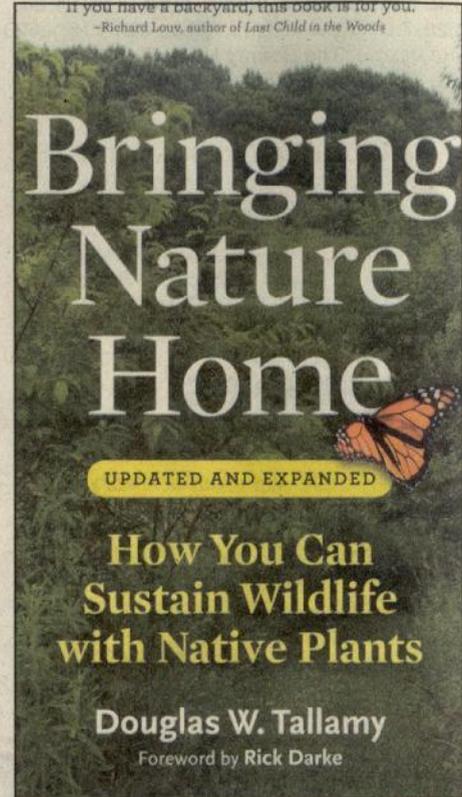
now provide a large selection.

You can help the songbirds by adding native plants to your garden. And when you see some insects on their leaves, think about how much those baby birds are going to enjoy lunch.

The author of this book, Douglas Tallamy, is professor and chairman of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware in Newark.

"Bringing Nature Home," aptly subtitled "How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants" and published by Timber Press, is priced at $17.95. There is also a companion Web site at www.bringingnaturehome.net.

Editor's note: Brent Marsh likes wild animals. But instead of living amongst elephants, lions, and wildebeests, he lives in Georgetown, where the insects and birds in his garden are just as exciting, though a lot smaller. "You just have to look," he says. He became interested in native plants when he noticed that the wilder the garden became, the more songbirds it attracted. A retired University of Delaware-educated engineer, Mr. Marsh recently completed the Master Gardener classes.

For more information about becoming a Master Gardener, or for assistance with your home horticulture needs, contact DSU Cooperative Extension at (302) 857-6424 or mmoor@desu.edu.

If you have a backyard, this book is for you.
—Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*

Bringing Nature Home

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants

Douglas W. Tallamy
Foreword by **Rick Darke**

Submitted photo
A new book by University of Delaware professor Douglas W. Talamy suggests helping the songbirds by adding native plants to your garden.