

Native plants protect shoreline and wildlife

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THREE YEARS AGO the lawn at the river's edge in Mimi Boseman's Virginia Beach yard was an ugly scene - brown grass and muddy areas all covered in goose poop. Today, the landscape has totally changed. Salt-tolerant, native marsh grasses that don't mind the rising tide wave in the breeze. Native shrubs and flowers and wildlife brighten the area. You see all things wild and wonderful, except Canada geese.

Geese don't like grasses and plants that block their line of vision to the water, so they stay away from this natural habitat. Boseman said she rarely sees geese in her yard, though dozens hang out in the neighbors' yards nearby.

Boseman has had bluebirds nesting in a house she erected in her new buffer garden. She sees dragonflies and other pollinators buzzing about among the blooms of flowers like buttonbush and seaside goldenrod.

Leading to the boat dock is a meandering path through the grasses that rustle when you walk by. The shrubs and flowers are going to seed and turning toasty brown for the winter. The area is becoming what nature intended waterfront property to be. The plants prevent sediment and pollution from Boseman's yard and the streets beyond from running into the

Lynnhaven River. In reverse, the plants absorb flooding from the river when the water is high. And, of course, the plants prevent geese from taking up residence.

The area requires little maintenance, Boseman said, other than cutting back the saltbush that already has arrived of its own accord and seems to want to take over.

Boseman worked with Eric Gunderson who owns Southern Branch Nursery in Chesapeake. Gunderson is a landscaper and raises hard-to-come-by natives for use in his jobs and for sale to the public. A purist when it comes to using natives in his landscape plans, Gunderson has convinced Boseman of their value.

Not only are the native grasses, shrubs and flowers protecting the shoreline, they also are providing food and cover for wildlife. Pollinators are attracted to native plants and butterflies and other insects must have them as host plants for their young.

For example, Boseman used to like Knock Out roses and wondered why Gunderson suggested native marsh roses for her buffer.



"Eric said, 'Don't you want something that will feed the birds?' "

Birds dine on the marsh rose's red rose hips, which now brighten the buffer garden. Caterpillars and other insects that are vital to a garden's success won't eat leaves of non-natives, like the Knock Out rose.

Boseman became such a believer in Gunderson's approach that she went on to have him redo more of her backyard, a gentle slope that leads to the water from her expansive back deck in Birdneck Point.

Gunderson planted shrubs and trees like native beautyberry, elderberry, sumac and sassafras instead. The march of natives up the slope continued this spring when Gunderson planted native shrubs and flowers around the deck. Plants include deciduous native azalea, clethra, blueberries and native flowers like coneflower. In the three-year process, Boseman estimates she has removed about 50 percent of her lawn. Though the initial expenses have been large, she thinks that she is saving every day on maintenance.

"Think of how much it costs to cut it, fertilize it, aerate it and seed it, " she said. "Here all we have to do is pull a few weeds and keep it mulched."

Boseman loves the results. She loves the way it looks, and she loves that she is doing the right thing for the environment, whether the river or the wildlife.

"It's not manicured," she said. "We are so accustomed to proper beautiful gardens that look like Morse code - dot, dot, dash.

"If it's a little wild, it's OK," she said. "It's organized chaos out there."

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