

Creating a wetland, wildflower meadow

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Whenever there was a storm tide on the Lynnhaven River in Virginia Beach, the water rose over the rock bulkhead in Mimi Boseman's Birdneck Point yard and flooded the lawn at the river's edge. Hardly a pretty picture.

"It was muddy, unattractive and full of goose poop," Boseman said.

So she decided to try and restore the muddy lawn area in a way that would enhance river water quality. The stone bulkhead had been in place for years, and there was no practical way to remove it. But, Boseman thought, she could at least have plants that would have normally grown along the river, rather than grass. Cutting back on lawn area and planting native grasses and shrubs instead would hold the soil, prevent erosion and be much prettier to look at than the ugly, muddy scar.

"To me, a natural shoreline is beautiful," Boseman said.

She pointed to property across the creek, where native salt-tolerant plants and shrubs grew down to the water's edge and no bulkhead defined the barrier between land and river.

Now, when her restored buffer fills in, she will have a green area that will look far more natural than the green lawn did. Eric Gunderson, owner of Southern Branch Nursery in Chesapeake, drew up the plan and did the work. Salt-tolerant native grasses are planted near the water's edge and native flowers and shrubs, behind.

"It will be a wetland wildflower meadow with shrubs, so wildlife can pass through," Gunderson said.

Many of the plants will have colorful blooms and they, along with grasses and shrubs, not only will absorb the flooding from the river, but also will absorb rainwater runoff from the land. The plants will help retain sediment and pollutants from washing into the river, too. An added bonus: The Canada geese that loved Boseman's muddy green lawn will probably go elsewhere. Geese don't like hanging out in taller grasses and plants.

"They take away the open sight line that they like to have," said Joe Scalf, the restoration-project coordinator for Lynnhaven River NOW at the time.

Boseman initially turned to Scalf for advice on how to install the environmentally sensitive buffer. Boseman has been raising baby oysters off her dock for several years, and the yard restoration was an opportunity for her to put more of her thoughts into action.

"I wanted to do the right thing" she said.

Scalf advised her to work with a landscaper to install native plants to create a high marsh meadow and buffer. After a false start with another landscaper, Boseman turned to Gunderson. Also a landscaper, he raises native plants to use in his projects because the plants are so hard to find. He started with a layer of biodegradable jute netting as erosion control over the area to be planted. In addition to being biodegradable, jute netting has a larger gauge and a tighter weave than nylon netting, so it is less likely to entangle wildlife, a hazard that Boseman wanted to avoid.

Gunderson installed coir logs, made of coconut fiber, around the edges of the buffer to protect the young plants from flooding until they get established. The logs will eventually decompose. Then more than 1,000 native plants, from grass plugs, to wildflowers, to shrubs, were installed.

"All the species are native to the area," Scalf said, "and appropriate for the tidal marsh and buffer."

Knee-high string crisscrosses the plants to keep the geese from dining on the young plants.

"Because of the treatment necessary for working near the water, it looks very striking and different from what people are used to seeing," Scalf noted.

But in three years, Boseman hopes to have a full native wildflower and grass meadow at the foot of her property that will look strikingly natural. Gunderson said some of the plants would bloom as early as this summer.

"What we are trying to do," he said, "is reproduce nature as it was."

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