



## Mother Nature, The First Master Gardener

Mike Hillman, Master Gardener Spouse

Soon after we got married, my wife and I moved to a small farmette outside of Emmitsburg. Being of English ancestry, it wasn't long before my wife's gardening desires were let loose. She signed up to become a Master Gardener, and much to my pleasure, each class resulted in new plants around the house.

After completing her Master Gardener certification, my wife continued her education by taking courses at Longwood Gardens. When home, she diligently applied what she was learning to beautify the property.

A 60-foot by 120 section of the back yard was set aside for a formal raised bed garden. Enclosed by a beautiful white picket fence, it was soon a sight to behold.\* Within its enclosed space were plants and flowers of every shape and size. Each plant had a plate in front of it bearing the Latin and common names. The beds were religiously mulched, weeded, and pathways were spotless.

Having grown up in suburbia where one's status in life was measured by how close-cropped the lawn was, and the tidiness of the garden, I was pretty proud of her efforts. Spring, summer and fall, the yard was full of color. But those colors came at a huge expense, in the form of water usage and replacement plants, but most of all, my wife's time.

While the gardens were pretty to the human eye, one could count the number of butterflies on one hand. Birds never gave it a second thought as they flew by. Even the bees seemed unimpressed.

About this time my wife fell under the influence of New York Botanical Garden, champions native plants. My wife soon declared her gardens were to be non-native free and began to rip out all the non-native plants.

The following year she abandoned the garden to Mother Nature. She ceased her daily watering, weeding, and mulching routines. By summer, non-native plants escaping the purge of plants the summer before were dead. In their place, native plants, some planted, others 'volunteers,' assumed their rightful place.

Today the once pristine walkways in the formal garden are overgrown. The white picket fence I worked so hard to build is now only visible in spots. Before going native, one could take in the vista of the whole garden from a single spot, now you can barely see five feet of it.

I lost the tidiness that I once mistook as a mark of affluence, but that's all I lost. The colors of the gardens are now more spectacular. As you make your way through the garden you're greeted by flowers of every shape, size and color, and every plant is teeming with butterflies and bees which in turn support an ever growing colony of native birds.

Even weeds, the bane of most gardeners, were allowed to reestablish themselves. Just like native plants, native weeds and their seeds serve as an important food source to native wildlife.

Now don't get me wrong, my wife didn't hang up her gardening tools. She still spends hours in her gardens, but unlike past years, it's not spent fighting Mother Nature, but helping her. The frustrations of the past have been replaced by the joys of working in a healthy garden.

Do I miss the tidy gardens? Yes. Do I want them back? Not on your life. Yes, my wife freely admits her gardens looks out of control, but I don't care. I would rather have a garden teaming with native plants gone wild and wildlife any day over the gardens I grew up with. Besides, native plant gardens require less tending, which means more time enjoying them!

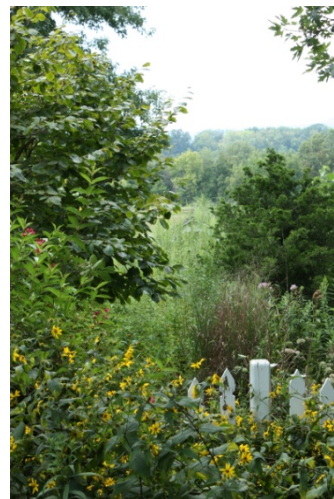
So next year, as you plan out your garden, set aside places for native plants and let Mother Nature show you how good a Master Gardener she is. After all, she was the very first Master Gardener and still the best!

*\*Building a picket fence was the subject of a previous MG column. View it and previous Master Gardener articles at [emmitsburg.net](http://emmitsburg.net) under gardening. "The Picture Perfect Garden Fence: The Perfect Winter Garden Project" by Mike Hillman.*

*For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the University of Maryland Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.*



Before Nature's Garden



Nature's Garden