

# Homegrown Wildlife Preserves in Cabin John: Getting in on the Ground Floor

BY ERIC DINERSTEIN  
Contributing Writer

ILLUSTRATION BY TRUDY NICHOLSON  
Contributing Artist

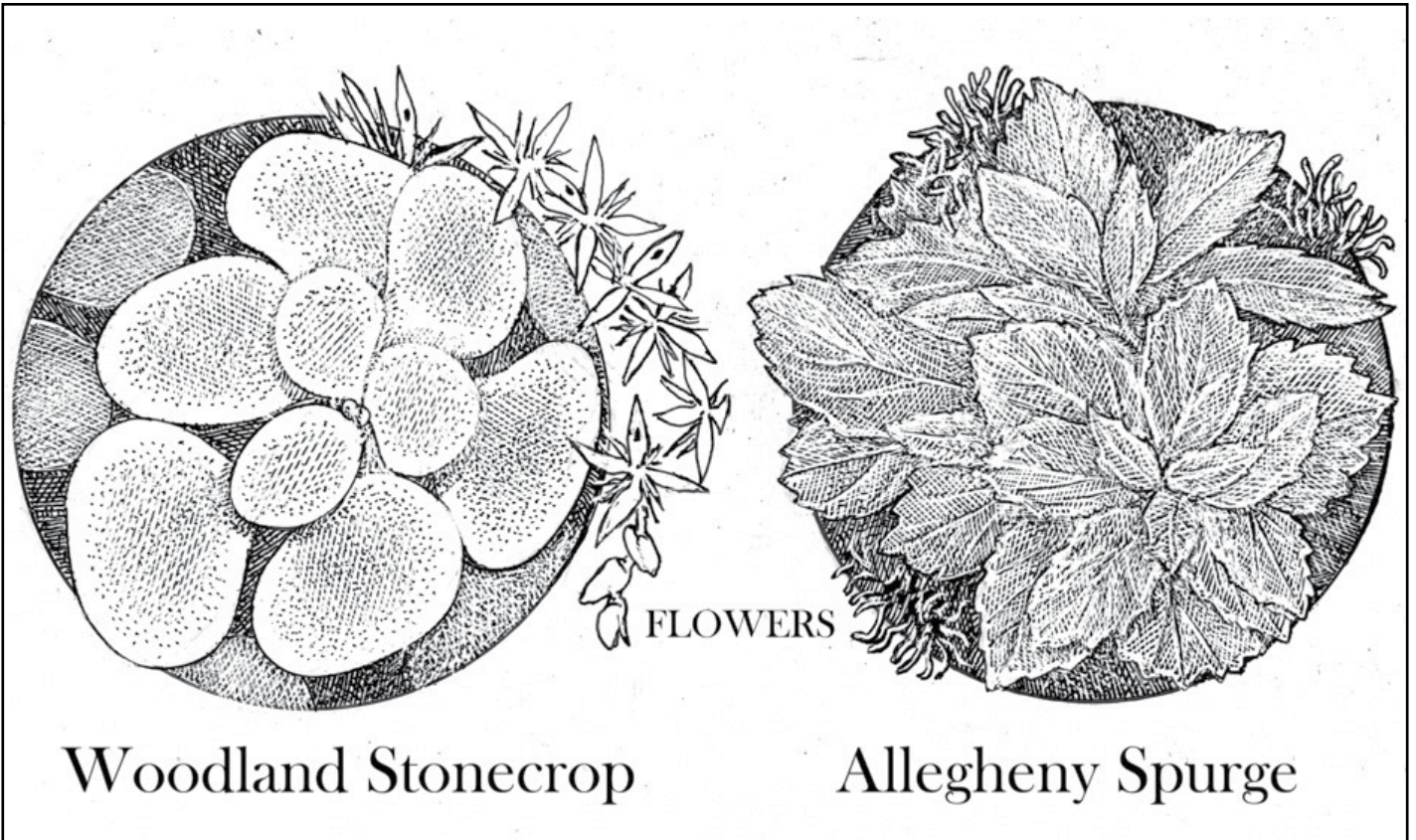
**T**horeau cherished his Walden Pond. We, the fortunate residents of Cabin John, live closer to wilderness than the reclusive Henry David. To the south is the wild Potomac and its luxurious riparian forest, which form the C&O Canal National Historic Park. A fact few know: the Potomac is one of the three wildest (i.e., undammed) rivers to flow through the capital city of any nation. To the north, protecting us from the noise and motor madness of the Beltway, is Cabin John Local Park, which hugs Cabin

John Creek and serves as refuge for many rare plants of Maryland.

But in between these two parks, where has the wildness gone that not so long ago was in evidence? The truth is that Cabin John has been transformed in the past 25 years from a village of small cottages underneath majestic shade trees and patches of wild to large houses with extensive lawns and many fewer trees. This is not a condemnation but simply an observation of a trend, one that plays out in many of the suburbs of large metropolitan areas of America.

Another trend some of us have noticed: with the increase in the cover of our yards

by monocultures of grass lawns kept green and thriving by chemicals and fertilizers, populations of bees, butterflies, moths, and beetles—what E. O. Wilson called, “the little things that run the world”—are plummeting rapidly. Even those who don’t like beetles or flies or are scared of caterpillars falling from tree canopies probably love the songs of birds in our backyards. But in fact, those songbirds—our beloved catbird, the spunky Carolina wren, the proud American robin, the ethereal flutist known as the wood thrush—are made primarily from bugs. And these songsters require lots of bugs to feed their young and themselves. In September, when insects become scarce, a helping of



Woodland Stonecrop

Allegheny Spurge

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE ...▶

# HOMEGROWN WILDLIFE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

wild fruits is also a draw for those species needing to tank up before migrating south for winter. (Of course, the other vital role that insects play besides being a convenient meal is their central role in pollination of our crops and garden plants).

Perhaps Cabin John residents have become more tuned in to birds than ever before, given how much time we have spent this past year staring out into our backyards. As the world ponders how to build back better after the coronavirus pandemic, what can we, as good citizens of Cabin John, do to aid in this effort? My suggestion is that, in addition to whatever else we might plan to do, we become good ecological citizens as well. And more specifically, I suggest we join the growing global movement to restore nature by turning a fraction of our expansive grass lawns and city parks into homegrown wildlife preserves.

Entomologist Doug Tallamy, a professor at the University of Delaware and the leading proponent of bringing nature into our backyards, identifies the scope of the problem and what we can do to rectify it:

*"It's actually quite simple—abandon the age-old concept that humans live here and nature is somewhere else and embrace the concept that we need to share our spaces with nature. We enjoy a walk in the woods; we enjoy seeing butterflies, birds, beautiful flowers, etc. Research has shown that spending time in nature is the very best way to recharge your attention span and deal with the stresses of life. Living with nature is a healthy necessity, not a sacrifice we must endure.*

*We have 45.6 million acres of lawns and it is growing by 500 square miles each year. That's an area 8 times the size of New Jersey from which the species that run our ecosystems have been removed. Now that we see the big picture, homeowners can take action.*

*Lawn should be restricted to the areas on which we walk in our landscapes; it is a mechanism for guiding us through our landscapes. Lawn should not be our default landscaping practice. If we cut the area of lawn in half, we could create the equivalent of a new national park that is 20 million acres in size. That alone would create the biggest natural area in the nation, bigger than most of our national parks combined."*

In Cabin John, most residents have large yards, a rarity inside the Capital Beltway. We don't have to go so far as to cut the land area of our yards in half, though. Creating a garden bed devoted to native plants would be a good start.

To guide the ecological citizens among us, the columns for this year will have a common theme: What are the most beautiful

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

# HOMEGROWN WILDLIFE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

native plants we can grow that feed the bugs and butterflies that feed the birds and help prevent the extinction of life on Earth?

Each month's column will feature a favorite that is easy to grow, is available from local nurseries, and that contributes to rewilding your yard. Can you imagine an archipelago of wild gardens across Cabin John, serving as a safe haven for Monarch butterflies and Luna moths? Where American Goldfinches gather seeds and catbirds imitate the bird songs of the neighborhood? When it comes to nature, isn't this the very essence of building back

better?

We'll build up to the end point, the last column of 2021, for creating your own backyard forest preserve. But for the first installment, let's start small with that flower bed or patch of yard turned over to nature. This month considers the ground cover we gardeners often plant or allow to spread to avoid weeding. The most common invaders, English ivy and winter creeper (covered in last year's columns on alien invasives) crowd out native plants in our forests and in our yards. Let's yank them out, and in their place, try these two spectacular

ground covers: Woodland stonecrop and Allegheny spurge. Many people are familiar with stonecrops: with their thick succulent leaves they are popular indoor and roof-garden plants as they require little care and store water in their tissues. The non-native varieties planted on roofs are covered in sprays of flowers of vivid colors. Our single native, Woodland stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*), has a pure white corolla. It thrives in bright sun and is about the easiest plant to propagate: if you inadvertently slice off a stem in planting or transplanting, stick it in the ground. The plant spreads

quickly over the surface and in the spring, you will enjoy a carpet of lovely foliage and white flowers (you can even eat the leaves in salad or put the flowers in jars of pickles). Make your bees happy; those that come will pollinate other flowering species in your garden.

Then there is the Allegheny spurge, one of the most beautiful ground covers in the region, sporting male flowers rising in spikes of white above attractive scalloped leaves dotted in purple and silver. It is much more attractive, in fact, than the ubiquitous non-native Japanese spurge that chokes out

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →

all below it. The Allegheny, or mountain, spurge spreads more slowly than Japanese spurge so you can plan out your garden and move it and stonecrop around.

If you have picked a sunny spot to start your very own wildlife preserve, stick in plugs of woodland stonecrop stems a few inches apart. If you have a shady spot, go with the Allegheny spurge. Above all, don't give the periwinkle (a highly toxic plant that is all over gardens in Cabin John) an inch of space and keep out the English ivy.

With these native ground covers, we can beautify Cabin John and offer food for our dwindling bee populations as well as all the other insects threatened by the chemical warfare that rages in suburbia. **VN**

