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‘Seeing is Believing’ – Flying Trillium Brings Back Native Landscapes

News *By Robyn Hager*

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Carolyn Summers. Olivia Sippel

NEVERSINK - Carolyn Summers is no stranger to rural New York. She grew up in the Adirondacks and near Lake Ontario, she likened her childhood to that of “Christopher Robin, because I had 100-acre woods to play on.” Plants were a part of life.

“My mother was a big gardener,” Summers said, “that’s how she fed us.”

Fast-forward a few decades, and Summers found her forever home in the Sullivan County town of Neversink, near its historic reservoir.

Since then, she’s been working on returning the land to its native state, before plants from Europe and Asia changed the face of American forests. Her home, called Flying Trillium Gardens and Preserve, is now a nonprofit that offers free tours.

It was actually largely New York City, not just the country, that led Summers down this path. She pursued a degree in landscape architecture from City College of New York (CCNY), where she was taught about the importance of native plants in fostering a healthy ecosystem.

“New York City was very hip to native plants during that time,” Summers said. “They were very aware of the need for native plants because they were so overrun with invasives.”

Though her interest in wildlife was always present, Summers’ love of natives blossomed at CCNY.

Early in her career, Summers created maps of waterbird locations in the wetland areas on Staten Island for the New York City Audubon Society, then led by Al Appleton. On January 1, 1990, an underwater pipe belonging to Exxon burst in the Arthur Kill between Staten Island and New Jersey, spilling oil across one of the wetlands Summers had mapped. The spill covered the area so close to her map work, that Exxon officials asked her “Did you do this? Did you want to protect this area so badly?’ They were trying to blame it on us because of my map and that it was so specific.”

The $10 million settlement from the lawsuit the state of New Jersey leveled against Exxon is a big reason why, Summers said, there are so many parks in that area today.

Later in 1990, Appleton went on to become the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and brought Summers along with him. During her time at the DEP, Summers married and had a daughter, Kate. The family moved up to Hastings-On-Hudson in central Westchester. It was during this time that the DEP instated a rule that all plants used to restore areas have to be native plants. This has now been a regular practice for over 30 years.

Now immersed in the work, Summers said she did “the most significant thing I’ve ever done” – starting her first demonstration garden at her home in Hastings.

“In order to plant native plants, you have to show them,” Summers said. “A lot of people don’t even know them.”

Her garden became a neighborhood attraction and she realized she was beginning to outgrow it, so, in 1997, she purchased land in Neversink from a developer who had plans for putting up a housing complex. When Summers purchased the land, it was all hay fields that the previous owners “mowed from stone wall to stone wall” – very different from her full-shade set-up in Westchester.

“I get to practice on the real thing here,” Summers said, reminiscing on her first moments on her new property. “This was something I was totally in charge of and could make all the decisions. It was like having a great big experiment in front of me. How do you turn a hay field into something more productive?” That meant returning it to native plants.

So how, exactly, do we qualify what a ‘native plant’ is?

“If it’s been here since forever, it’s a native plant,” Summers says. For nonnative stuff, if “they aren’t harming anything and are a part of the lifecycle of insects, they aren’t invasive.”

Summers referenced the work of Douglas Tallamy, an ecologist at the University of Delaware who is known for his entomological research. Best known for his book *Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens*, Tallamy posits that planting native is not just about the fact that we are losing our indigenous plants as much of the landscape is gobbled up by invasives and non-native ornamentals, but it’s that we’re risking a crisis-level loss of insects, especially pollinators, in the process.

The simple fact is that most insects are not capable of digesting plants that evolved on a different continent, and, as our forests and yards have filled up with invasives and non-native ornamentals, we have lost untold acres of habitat for insect life. Without them, there’s not much to feed bats, fish, and birds. It’s the work of places like Flying Trillium to try and stop this decline in biodiversity.

Insects have become such a vital part of Summers’ ecosystem that she bases most of her planting around both the number of insects the plant is capable of hosting and the importance of those insects.

“You won’t have insects if you only have exotics,” Summers said, “and the plant industry always made it seem like not having insects was a good thing, but they don’t think it through; pests are a part of life.”

In 2010, she wrote her own book on the subject: *Designing Gardens with Flora of the American East*. The book was born out of classes she was teaching through the Native Plant Center at Westchester Community College. “I realized that if people wanted to do this, they needed to know the ‘why.’” After selling well during its first release in the early 2010s, Summers and her daughter, Kate Brittenham, revised the book last year.

The best plants to grow, Summers said, are trees. Oaks, for instance, host over 500 different insects, and these, along with dogwoods and maple trees, are some of Summers’ favorites. In terms of flowers, the aster family, which includes goldenrod, can collectively host the greatest number of species, at about 150 to 175.

But there’s more to it than just that biggest number. “It’s more about biodiversity than count itself,” Summers said.

There are, for example, some native species that host only a few species but are vital sources of nutrition to these insects, so if you don’t have them those insects will decrease in number significantly – think of the effort to save monarch butterflies by growing more milkweed. And there are even some nonnative or “exotic” plants that can host American insects.

There is a difference between “exotic” and “invasive,” Summers emphasized.

“Invasive species,” she explained, “cause harm by displacement and taking up space and serve as hosts for parasites that would affect our plants.” Think mugwort, tree of heaven, burning bush, Norway maple, and the dreaded Japanese knotweed.

An exotic species, on the other hand, can be planted ornamentally or aesthetically and not cause harm, as long as they aren’t multiplying or causing any harm to the environment they’re planted in – although many invasive species were quietly exotic for years or decades before breaking out.

Summers sees a lot of benefits to her approach. Last year, when spongy moths raided the Hudson Valley, her property in Neversink didn’t have any issues – despite land not even twenty miles away covered in the invasive caterpillars.

At this point, the mission for her property has shifted from adding new native plants to subtracting them. “I planted little bluestem and it did really well. Then it moved out and around, and when it started to spread, I started to lose other things. This year I started mowing early and know I have to keep it mowed.”

Beyond trimming down on those natural aggressors, Summers also deals with a persistent problem that all gardeners know too well: deer. Her solution was to establish a hunting club that uses her property every season, with special permits from the DEC to get as many does as the hunters want.

Summers even said that she intends on approaching the DEC for permission to do a “nuisance hunt,” which is a hunt during a different time than the regular hunting season because she intends to do “anything I can to cut down on numbers.” But she doesn’t think it’s enough.

“We’re falling down on the job of being predators. We separated ourselves out from nature, as if we’re far apart from it, not a part of it,” Summers said.

The name for the preserve itself, Flying Trillium, actually comes in part from the over-population of deer, who almost wiped out the population of trilliums, which, Summers said, are like “deer candy.”

“All of the trilliums in this particular area were growing out of the side of a ravine. Because of the way they were sweeping down, and at that angle you couldn’t see the third leaf, so to me it looked like an old biplane, and I called them my flying trilliums,” Summers said. “When it came time to pick a title it sounded whimsical enough.”

The garden, though now a nonprofit, has been completely self-funded since day one and, although they get a significant tax break, Summers still pays property taxes for her land. She sees the free tours she conducts as “very rewarding,” adding “it’s a wonderful experience to take people around and see their eyes open… it keeps me going.”

Everyone is connected to Flying Trillium via word-of-mouth and the minimal Facebook advertising that the garden does. “We’ve had international people [come here], and a lot of people from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York City.”

What Summers tells people they can do to help the growing problem of invasives in our communities: “Remove as much of your lawn as you can and plant whatever pleases you that’s native and beautiful and try to plant more trees.” She cites an old, apocryphal Chinese proverb that says you plant trees for your children, not yourself.

To that end, her daughter Kate has followed in her mother’s footsteps, pursuing garden design. “It is her dream,” Summers said, “to find funding to do this for people who don’t have money. One of her first clients were people of limited means and she liked working for them and not charging them a lot.”

Summers intends on passing Flying Trillium on to her daughter when she retires, and to put a conservation easement on the land to make sure it stays the way it is now.

“People just need exposure,” Summers said. “The education aspect is the most important part. Seeing is believing. People have to come here to get the full flavor. People just need contact with nature. They need to feel that life is still happening and going on.”

To learn more about Flying Trillium Gardens and Preserve, check out their website here: https://www.flyingtrillium.com/, and check out Summers’ book here: https://www.flyingtrillium.com/about/designing-gardens-with-flora-of-the-american-east.

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