

Going native

Rick Huffman's vision of how homeowners can put native plants to work in their yards and gardens

By Anne K. Moore, Contributing Writer

Greenville native Rick Huffman is passionate about the environment. "I couldn't get my buddies to go into the woods any more because all I wanted to talk about was plants," Huffman says with a laugh. "I had to cultivate new friends." He contacted like-minded individuals and built a core of committed people. In 1996, they became the South Carolina Native Plant Society.

Self starter

Huffman flip-flopped through several landscape-related jobs after graduating from the University of Georgia. When he couldn't interest employers in using native plants and sustainable gardening practices, he decided, "If I'm going to do this, I'm going to have to do it myself."

Prepare for spring!

This 11-page March 2009 special lawn-and-garden section is packed with ideas to help you make plans for improving your home landscape.

Start here with award-winning gardening writer Anne K. Moore's opening feature on South Carolina native plant expert Rick Huffman, who offers tips for low-maintenance and environmentally sound landscaping.

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Rick Huffman has earned wide recognition for his visionary approach to landscaping. He was named Environmental Educator of the Year and recipient of the Governor's Award for Environmental Awareness.

John Bruce

These experiences led to his business, Earth Design, Inc. The landscape architecture and environmental design firm came into being 13 years ago in Pickens.

"Education leads to understanding," he says. He travels the state speaking, teaching and installing earth-friendly gardens. The Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative member has won numerous awards for his volunteer and professional work including Environmental Educator of the Year and the Governor's Award for Environmental Awareness.

Working with schools and the children they serve are Huffman's most rewarding activities. On six-and-a-half acres in Duncan, near Spartanburg, he designed an interactive scale model representing the state of South Carolina. There, schoolchildren can walk in a miniature state of South Carolina over walking trails depicting interstate systems. The



major cities are outdoor classrooms. Rivers and lakes run through it, symbolized by dry stream beds and rain gardens.

The project is named SCALE (for South Carolina Academic Learning Environment) and serves to provide an outdoor learning classroom where learning about our state and its environments are realized. Huffman has landscaped with native plants in each region of the state, from the piedmont to the coastal plains. For information, access spart5.k12.sc.us/scale.

Stepping softly on the earth

When planning a landscape for an individual homeowner or business, Huffman's focus is on plant communities. "Our ecosystem design makes us different," he says. The surest way to build a landscape of native plants is to look at where they came from. "With our 65-mile-per-hour lifestyles, we have forgotten how to look closely," Huffman explains. Gardeners should "learn to look at nature. There are models all around us." Homeowners can be more environmentally friendly by integrating rain barrels, rain gardens and native plants into a new or existing landscape.

For instance, Huffman promotes the use of special fungi to replace expensive chemical fertilizer and rainwater instead of metered or well-water irrigation.



Earth Design created this rooftop garden at a high school in the Upstate to mimic a granitic outcrop plant community and provide an educational resource.

Rainwater harvesting is not new. It has been used around the world for thousands of years. By hooking up a rain barrel, you can save water that would otherwise run into storm drains. A roof area of only 1,000 square feet might provide about 600 gallons of water during a one-inch rainfall. If you use the collected rainwater on dry days, there will always be room for more rain.

In order to put a rain barrel to use, your house should have gutters and downspouts. The rain barrel system should contain a tight-fitting lid. Lids on rain barrels are important to keep out thirsty animals that might fall in and drown, and to keep the mosquito

population from using it as a nursery school for their wiggly youngsters. It should have a diverter so when the barrel is full, the water reroutes back to the downspout and out to a drainage area. Using a rain garden as a drainage area slows or stops water runoff in the yard.

A rain garden's purpose is to hold water in the landscape where it can percolate to the plant roots. It holds and slowly filters excess water back to the underground aquifer. If you have a natural depression in your yard, you already have a spot for a rain garden.

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Earth Design landscaped this backyard setting where native plants nestle the home while inviting a stroll of sensory delight and discovery.




This meadow gracing the Table Rock State Park Visitors Center on Scenic Highway 11 in Pickens County was planted by Earth Design with native grasses and wildflowers as a complement to the park's natural beauty.



The conceptualization of a meadow is manifest in this Earth Design setting along the shoreline of a waterfront residential community. With a steady visitation of butterflies, the tapestry of native plant textures, colors, and hues are vibrant all summer.



Carnivorous native plants dominate an Earth Design natural bog ecosystem that helps absorb runoff and pollutants while capturing insects for supplemental food.



Rain gardens

A rain garden publication has been written specifically for South Carolina residents. Released in October 2008, The South Carolina Rain Garden Manual was created by the Carolina Clear program, an initiative of Clemson University to inform and educate communities about water quality, water quantity, and the cumulative effects of storm water.

Download at clemson.edu/carolinaclear/cc_toolbox, e-mail for print copy, kgiacal@clemson.edu, or write Katie Giacalone, Carolina Clear, 1360 Truxtun Ave., Suite 300-B, N Charleston, SC 29405.

On the other hand, you can dig one. It should be at least 10 feet from the house foundation. You can either pipe water from your downspouts or put the rain garden in a naturally occurring run-off area. Trees, flowers, and shrubs you use in the rain garden should be both wet- and drought-tolerant.

“Statistics show that a well-maintained landscape increases property values from 15 to 20 percent,” Huffman says. “Native plants located in the proper environment require much less maintenance than the average landscape.”

You can be a gardener and still have time to lounge in the garden furniture and hammocks of your garden “rooms.” There are plants that will flourish without trimming and fussing and that are adapted to local rainfall and soil types.

“If you choose natives and place them in the same or similar conditions where they grow in the wild, they will thrive in your garden,” Huffman says.

Hardy natives

Low-maintenance habitat gardening places focus on plant communities, their relationship to each other and the wildlife they support, he continues.

“Many of our native plant choices are extremely hardy,” Hoffman points out. He calls these, “Stick plants — you can beat them with a stick and they still grow.” Making a difference starts with one person and an idea. Plant trees to clean the air. Plant native grasses and sedges to clean the water. Plant flowers to feed the senses. Rick Huffman is doing all these things and making a difference. ♣

Anne K. Moore is a professional gardening writer who lives and gardens in Columbia.

To learn more

For help on landscaping with native plants, contact Earth Design, 405 Johnson Street, Pickens, SC 29671, (864) 898-1221, earthdesignsc.com. Another resource is South Carolina Native Plant Society, PO Box 491, Norris, SC 29667, scnps.org. For information about rain barrels, please access rain-barrel.com.

Best bets

Many flowers, trees, and shrubs are descendants of plants native to South Carolina. They have been selected from their wild counterparts for their hardiness and beauty. If you think of natives as hard to find, some of the tamed flora listed here might surprise you. These plant choices help create colorful native habitat gardens and are available in many garden centers statewide.

PERENNIALS

- Green and gold** (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)
- Wild indigo** (*Baptisia tinctoria*)
- Goldenrod** (*Solidago* spp.)
- Pink muhly grass** (*Muhlenbergia capillaries*)
- Blazing star** (*Liatris spicata*)
- Purple coneflower** (*Echinacea purpurea*)
- Switchgrass** (*Panicum virgatum*)
- Joe Pye weed** (*Eupatorium purpureum*)
- Shasta daisy** (*Leucanthemum* spp.)
- Gloriosa daisy** (*Rudbeckia* spp.)
- Cardinal flower** (*Lobelia cardinalis*)
- Bee balm** (*Monarda didyma*)
- Southern shield fern** (*Dryopteris marginalis*)
- Crested iris** (*Iris cristata*)
- Butterfly weed** (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

SHRUBS

- Sweet shrub** (*Calycanthus floridus*)
- Flowering anise** (*Illicium floridanum*)
- Virginia sweetspire** (*Itea virginicus*)
- Summer sweet** (*Clethra alnifolia*)
- Sweet azalea** (*Rhododendron arborescens*)
- Piedmont azalea** (*Rhododendron candescens*)
- Beautyberry** (*Callicarpa americana*)
- Drooping leucothoe** (*Leucothoe axillaris*)
- Lacecap hydrangea** (*Hydrangea radiata*)

TREES

- Fringe tree** (*Chionanthus virginicus*)
- Redbud tree** (*Cercis canadensis*)
- Red buckeye** (*Aesculus pavia*)
- Bottlebrush buckeye** (*Aesculus parviflora*)



The fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) is a small (12–15') drought-tolerant native tree that brings a breath of spring to the landscape.



Trumpet honeysuckle is an example of native vines and is recommended for gardens.



The star of the show in the fall and winter, pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaries*) is a common and tough native grass that is extremely drought tolerant. Its fall display lights up any landscape.



A native plant, flame azalea is known for its vibrant orange-red hues.



With a sweet fragrance and spires on reddish flowers, summer sweet *Clethra* (*Clethra alnifolia*) attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.