

Ecological practices, glorious gardens

By EVE MARX

Lynn Becker, a Katonah resident for 22 years, has always been interested in the garden. “I’ve loved gardening since I was very little, but never thought you could do it as a career,” Ms. Becker said, serving a guest date nut bread and green tea at the table in her cozy farmhouse kitchen. “After being an attorney, an executive recruiter, a substitute teacher and a freelance writer, I realized gardening is what I really want to do. I’m passionate about plants.”

Ms. Becker subscribes to the philosophy of William Morris, who famously said, “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.”

Her personal take on Morris’s words have guided her outside the house. Gardens, she believes, should be beautiful but useful. “I specialize in bringing ecological practices into the creation of glorious gardens,” Ms. Becker said. “My goal is integrating native plants which encourage birds and beneficial pollinators, including butterflies, to return to our gardens, while reducing or eliminating the need for fertilizers and dangerous pesticides,” she said. “Unlike the stereotypical native gardens with weedy-looking ‘good for you’ plants, my gardens are neat, generally weed-free, and can accommodate any design style from formal and sculptural to cottage romantic.” She’s into rain gardens, meadows, and compost piles, but her principal goal overall is the creation of beauty.



PHOTO COURTESY LYNN BECKER

Garden designer Lynn Becker

“Pretty and sterile brings no value, no purpose,” Ms. Becker said. “I think we owe the world more than that after what we’ve done to the environment.” She said that many people are under the misapprehension that a garden that’s natural, a native garden, is a bunch of weedy-looking plants surrounded by a lot of mulch. “It’s possible to incorporate native

plants and sustainable design into anything from a lush English cottage garden to a manicured English landscape to a minimalist Zen garden, and any style in between, if you work with someone who knows how to analyze the site and who truly understands the plants,” Ms. Becker said.

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Ms. Becker decided to get serious about landscape design after completing the cer-

tificate program at the Native Plant Center at Westchester Community College. She is a member of the board of the Bedford Audubon Society where she chairs the Native Plant committee. “I’ll have my certificate in landscape design and another in horticulture this June,” she said. “I started my business, Trout Lily Garden Design two years ago. My projects are in Westchester, Fairfield County, Nassau County and Manhattan.” Her work was recently featured in a spread in Darien-New Canaan magazine.

Ms. Becker said her preference is working on residential gardens. “I like talking to people about how they use their property and helping them design a garden that reflects their aesthetic sense and the particular site,” she said. “If you have a really sandy, sunny yard, you can tell me you love ferns and hosta until the cows come home, and I’ll tell you those are the wrong plants for your place. Putting the right plant in the right place is essential,” she said. “The reason you hire an independent garden designer is so you don’t find yourself in the situation where you’re in a garden store and they only want to sell you what’s in stock,” she said.

There are, of course, trends in landscape design. “In this area, and I believe in no small part because of Bedford 20/20, people are open to sustainable design,” Ms. Becker said. “They’re open to composting. They’re open to rain barrels and rain gardens and a

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more naturalistic style of design.” She said she really sees the difference when crossing the border into Connecticut, where there the look is more symmetrical and clipped with huge lawns.

“Instead of controlling nature I prefer working with it,” Ms. Becker said. “My goal is to encourage people to plant things that won’t just survive, but will thrive with no fertilizer, no pesticides, even no rain,” she said. “I planted a lot of things in my own garden after Hurricane Sandy knocked down my fence and took all the plantings with it, and the new things I planted are all drought resistant. Honestly, I never watered at all last summer.”

Let’s talk about color. “I think many people don’t realize the spectrum of color available in native plants,” Ms. Becker said. “There’s phlox with its purple cone flowers. There’s black-eyed Susan. There are native roses. Butterfly weed is a magnet for butterflies and comes in pink, white and bright orange. Trout lily is an absolutely beautiful native plant that blooms

in early spring, and has a tiny, bright yellow lily-looking flower that hangs upside down,” she said. “A patch of them under a tree in the woodlands just glows. Trillium comes in white and pink and mauve and yellow. People forget that green is a fabulous color with a lot of range. There’s dark green to chartreuse, which planted with other plants that have white blossoms, is just breathtaking. Amsonia comes in two varieties, the one with little blue flowers in the spring, and a more popular variety with feathery leaves that turn a gorgeous yellow in the fall. Another native plant, Clethra, has one of the most magnificent fragrances in the plant kingdom, and the leaves are an extraordinary gold. If you want autumn color you have to go with natives. There are native winter plants with fabulous red stems that just pop when the snow is around. Some have incredible berries that last through February,” she said.

Ms. Becker said she encourages her clients to live more harmoniously with nature. “You want the birds and the

butterflies,” she said. That is one of the reasons she so loves the plant known as Trout Lily. “It’s one of the earliest flowers to bloom in the woodlands,” she said. “The pollen offers a food source for the earliest insects so that other plants can be pollinated. That’s what the early spring flowers do — they’re a source of nutrition for the birds, who eat the insects that are inside of the plant. You want a food source for all the birds that migrate,” she said. “Dogwood is wonderful. Native American dogwood has berries that become ripe at the exact same time the native birds are ready to migrate south. It gives them an excellent food source for their long trip. Chinese dogwood blooms later and bears fruit later, but the birds can’t wait.”

Ms. Becker said that butterfly bush is “nice, and it attracts butterflies to drink the nectar, but the problem is that if you don’t have a host plant for the butterfly caterpillars, you won’t have the butterflies next year.” She advises planting butterfly weed and other plants that the larvae and the

caterpillars can use. “It’s about supporting nature.”

Not every client is prepared or ready to redo their entire garden. “If somebody wants to start small, I can do planters and pots in their yard,” Ms. Becker said. “I can give you the most beautiful planters you’ve ever had.” She said that when working with new clients, she enjoys becoming familiar with their aesthetic and their property and takes it from there. “Whether it’s a small butterfly garden, or building a terraced patio with seating walls or an infinity pool surrounded by a native meadow, I can do that.”

Ms. Becker never forgets her time working as a substitute teacher. “I enjoy education,” she said. “I enjoy teaching people how they can learn how to do some of these things themselves. Good landscaping really adds to the value of your home and how much you use and enjoy your house. And it doesn’t have to be expensive,” she said. “Please look at my website and check it all out.”

Ms. Becker can be reached through her website, troutlilygardendesign.com.