

My Aunt Dorothy used to say that everyone should be skilled in several ways so that they will never be out of work. Diversifying makes not only economic sense; it is beneficial in a myriad of ways for similar reasons. We are more likely to stay mentally alert and less prone to prejudice and other types of small mindedness, when we have neighbors and friends from a variety of backgrounds, with a variety of interests. Just as having several skills allows us to remain useful and capable in times when the job market is limited, we maintain our viability when we eat a variety of foods and we live in a diversified environment. Nutritionists urge us to, "Eat a Variety Every Day" and biologists remind us to celebrate biodiversity in our environment. Diversity allows us to be less dependent on any one species because we have, just for instance, several species of bees pollinating our crops instead of only one.

I have been thinking of environmental diversity recently as I pull out the less desirable plants, a.k.a. weeds, out of my one year old backyard meadow. I live on a hill of sand, which is great for drainage but it drains so rapidly that it is difficult to grow anything. (Think "less than two minute an inch perc rate; could not pre-soak.") So, last year, after twenty-one years of dried up vegetation I decided to put down some silty loam, topped with sandy loam, on top of my sandy hill and try to grow some grass. While I had the opportunity to start anew, I decided to allow myself the opportunity to ponder what I wanted to grow. While I certainly like the appearance of a lush green lawn, it seemed to me that people become slaves to that kind of lawn. I would hear people talking about getting rid of the grubs and which weed killer worked best. I thought of the little signs warning people, and their pets, to stay off because chemicals had recently been applied. That did it for me. I decided I would invest in some prairie grass seeds and try to have a natural area, sans chemicals or the dependency on them.

I suppose that some people would consider my little back yard ugly. Maybe I overlook its faults and see only beauty in the same way that a mother sees only wonder, magic and perfection when she gazes at her child. My small meadow is young and I see only potential when we meet. What I notice most in this second year, is the diversity of wildlife now attracted to the area. This was unexpected and, so, all the more delightful it is to see the increase of birds and the return of toads. It makes perfect sense now that I think about it. What do toads need? They need insects to eat. How can they survive if I kill off the wildlife with pesticides?

A natural meadow provides more than chemical-free plants and insects, though. As I hand-pull the undesirable plants, I notice that there are gaps, openings, little trails and both sunny areas and shaded areas. The wispy fescues allow bits of terra here and there, next to their tufts and mounds. These tiny areas of soil allow bugs to crawl and toads to hop. Near my house there is a small light tan toad. I think he likes the drips of water from the hose. In another area, there is a larger brown toad. This one prefers the sun. They have each staked out their territory and, with that in place, seem capable of sharing the area, especially now that there are enough bugs to go around.

I suppose that the birds were there all along, perhaps staying a distance away, but it seemed that fewer and fewer visited over the years. Now, finches, warblers and cardinals eat and visit in my backyard on a regular basis. Robins love being able to run

with head low, stop and listen with head high and then repeat this pattern of movement as they look for insects and “listen” through their feet for worms. It is the softness of the fescues and the spaces in between the clumps that allow the robins to run and listen. At least that is what I tell myself as I think of those lush, thick lawns other people have. I think that the insects and toads and birds don’t have room to walk through such a thick carpet. It makes me feel better as I look at my flopped over, clumpy grass crop with mounds of clover appearing here and there.

Considering the rising prevalence of asthma, allergic reactions and allergies in general, I figure that the fewer chemicals we have in our life the better. There are so many areas out of our control, when it comes to toxins, why willingly add more? It has long been known that the mixing of chemicals can have synergistic effects, where the combination is stronger or faster acting or longer acting than the separate chemicals would have. We walk through life in a sea of toxins and we wonder why we are sick, why we see an increase in immune dysfunction and allergic reactions.

Having a chemical free yard where I don’t have to post little signs warning people and pets to stay off, sounds like a good idea to me. Add some friendly toads and birds and it is a whole lot of fun.

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