Planting Combinations that Foster a Sense of Place

Photo by David Copps: Coastal Thicket, St. Marks Wildlife Refuge

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As a conservation landscape designer, I like to combine plants in patterns that evoke the character of my favorite natural areas in the Red Hills and Gulf Coastal Lowlands. Hardwood hammocks, pinelands and coastal thickets serve as models for creating sustainable gardens that provide a sense of these special bioregions that we call home.

When designing woodland gardens, I find inspiration from the forested slopes and bluffs along the Apalachicola River, as experienced from the trails of Torreya State Park. The key to imitating these woodlands is to provide characteristic plants of each forest layer. For the canopy, I use American beech, southern magnolia and white oak with American holly, eastern hophornbeam and Ashe magnolia in the understory. In the shrub zone, oakleaf hydrangea, needle palm and Florida anise are good choices. Groundcovers and wildflowers include spike grass, Christmas fern, woods fern, woodland phlox, columbine, and trillium.

For landscaping under the canopy of tall pine trees, I always think of the quail plantations between Tallahassee and Thomasville. I like to travel the scenic byways of this rural, historic countryside to see pine savannas that have been managed with prescribed fire for more than one hundred years. The resulting lush groundcover of native grasses and wildflowers can be duplicated in small patches in the urban setting. Some of my favorite grasses are purple-top, Indian grass, bluestem grasses, and love grass. As for wildflowers, there are many to choose from. A combination of black-eyed Susan, coreopsis, wild white indigo, coral bean, iron weed, narrow-leaf sunflower, and goldenrod will provide color and interest from spring through fall. In my garden, I let the seed stalks of grasses and wildflowers stand through the winter to provide a much needed food source for over-wintering songbirds.
When a screening hedge is needed along a property boundary, my mind pictures the dense coastal thickets as seen from Lighthouse Road in the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. Based on that vision, I prescribe a mix of yaupon holly, wax myrtle, red cedar, live oak, sabal palm, saw palmetto, American beautyberry, bear grass, and muhly grass. Besides visual screening, this pattern provides thick cover and plentiful berries for songbirds and other wildlife.

If you have a favorite Red Hills natural area, why don’t you bring it home? Besides those natural areas described above, there are plenty more to choose from including sandhills, flatwoods, marshes, swamps, and floodplains. By incorporating key plants in characteristic patterns you can create meaningful and interesting gardens that express the unique qualities of this very special place.

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