

My name is Nancy Lawson, and I'm a Maryland master gardener, master naturalist, and certified Chesapeake Bay landscaping professional. I'm also the author of a book on ecological gardening published in 2017 by Princeton Architectural Press. I speak locally and nationally at botanic gardens, universities, state departments of natural resources, national wildlife refuges and nonprofit conservation groups.

Every place I've visited is special, but our beloved home state of Maryland is ecologically unique. We're situated in a transition zone, where temperate and subtropical climates meet. As the University of Maryland Home and Garden Information Center notes, our local environment is not conducive to growing turfgrass species, which are from other parts of the world and are better suited for places with longer cool or warm seasons. Our beautiful Maryland trees easily shade out turf. In this environment, maintaining a lawn that's dense enough to control erosion is a struggle, often requiring high levels of fertilizer and pesticides that end up in the watershed.

But while turfgrass doesn't grow well here, so many of our hometown plants do. We have Maryland plants for shady spots, from sea oats grass to Appalachian sedge, from ostrich fern to mayapples. We have Maryland plants for sunny places, like Maryland senna and cardinal flower and black-eyed Susans. We have Maryland shrubs and trees, like silky dogwoods and pawpaws and persimmons and serviceberries and staghorn sumacs.

Many of these plants that evolved with our climate provide food not only for pollinators and birds; they can feed people too. They cool the air around us on baking July and August days. Their deep roots naturally filter pollutants. They help catch stormwater runoff, slowing it down before it enters the Chesapeake Bay. And they do it all for free.

Maryland plants are our plants, and we should be proud of them. But too often in my work around the state, I meet people whose homeowners associations do not allow them to garden with the plants that were born and raised here for millennia. A few HOAs recognize the need for environmentally sustainable landscapes, but many still demand turfgrass yards. This means that a million or more Maryland homeowners can't participate in public and private programs to reduce pollution from residential yards. They can't avoid applying pesticides and fertilizers that cause proven harm to children, pets and wildlife – including our iconic Baltimore orioles, who are vulnerable to pesticides sprayed in residential landscapes adjacent to woodlands. Homeowners in these communities can't do their part as Maryland citizens to clean up the watershed by planting flowers, shrubs and trees that belong in their own backyards.

Texas, California, Colorado and Florida have all passed legislation to reduce impacts of turfgrass and other high-input landscaping on their local environments. For the good of the birds, the Bay and our children, I hope that you will also support House Bill 279 to allow low-impact landscaping in Maryland too. Thank you.

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