



A Guide to

Natural Gardens

in Haliburton County
and Surrounding Areas



grounded.
GARDENING FOR LIFE

Why work against nature when you can work with it?



Sometimes when we talk about our gardens it sounds like we're talking about our cars. We say we need to maintain them—and that feels like a chore.

What if instead we simply steward our gardens, encouraging nature to do what it does best—grow?



Photo: Michael & Diane Weidner, Unsplash.
Cover illustration: Lyelca Rodrigues.

Why we're now
gardening for life.

What is a Natural Garden?

A better world is just
outside your door.

It's been only a few hundred—maybe a couple of thousand—years since humans came to believe we were separate from nature. While once upon a time we worked with the rest of nature, respecting its boundaries and following its rhythms, now we're at odds with it.

The result is crisis; not just of biodiversity as we lose thousands of species per year, but of psychology, as we become more estranged from the world around us.

Natural gardening is about fixing our broken relationship with nature.

It's about asking: Can we garden for nature as well as for humans? Can we make a beautiful landscape full of plants that have co-evolved with Ontario's insects and birds? Can we see the world from the perspective of everything in it, not just through our own eyes? And can we leave our small patch of the planet a little bit better?

The answer is yes. And the good news is, a better world is just outside your door.

Right plant, very right place

Gardeners know to match plants with site conditions, including climate hardiness zones. We go further than that. We match plants with Canadian ecozones. The plants we choose are from the ecozone they will be planted in, meaning they will be suited not just to the growing conditions but also to the other plants they will be growing with and to the wildlife that needs them.

Gardening for all of us

Until now, people have chosen plants that suit their own desires and social norms. This is why cultivated plants with large, bright blooms are popular—they conform to our ideas of beauty. Natural gardeners take a wider perspective, making choices according to the needs of the broad community of nature because they know what's good for nature is good for us too.

Why Natural Gardens Are Different

Looking forward

Natural gardeners think in four dimensions—they consider how their landscape changes through time. Instead of seeking an instant splash, they understand that nature is dynamic, that plants come and go and that a garden will develop into something different as time goes on. They have patience as their garden establishes and as the years pass they go with the flow, helping nature become its best self.



Plants take the lead

Gardening is about plants, not decks or walls or patios. That's not to say hard landscaping doesn't have a place, but the interest—and fun—comes when we explore the huge diversity of native plants and the insects, birds and mammals that come with them.

The New Rules of Gardening

Plant Densely

Nature abhors a vacuum, which is why you don't see bare ground in the wild. Natural gardens replicate that density, using a matrix of plants with varying growth habits, root structures, seasonality and longevity that as the years go on creates a thriving ecosystem. And the more plants you have, the less work there is for you to do because over time the plants take care of most of the weeding and watering for you.

Three Layers

Traditionally, we've tended to think of gardening as plant...space...plant. Each specimen is isolated like a statue in a museum. In the real world, however, plants grow right up against each other and on top of each other. It might seem like a battle for supremacy, but each plant, when chosen carefully, knows its place and knows how to play nicely with the others.

We use three layers: the groundcover layer, the vignette layer, and the structure layer. The groundcover does what it says on the tin—it provides a matrix that suppresses weeds. The vignette layer is where you'll find the fireworks—the summer flowers and happy bees. And the structure layer adds height and interest all year round.

Make a Community

No man is an island. And neither is a plant. We know that organisms don't exist on their own: they breathe the air of other organisms, they eat other organisms, and they shelter in them. We'd go hungry without the billions of bacteria in our guts.

Natural gardening recognizes this. We choose native plants, which are those which have co-evolved with everything else around here, and pair them with plants they get along with. The result is a kind of ecosystem that, as it matures, mostly stewards itself, allowing nature to do what it does best.

Inside the Matrix



Layer 1

Groundcover

The foundation of our matrix design is the groundcovers. They're the stage on which everything else takes place, and at least 50% of the plants we choose fulfil this role. Groundcovers are sometimes seen as workaday plants, but that doesn't mean they're plain and boring. In sunny gardens, we might choose Little Bluestem, which has seeds that shine on summer evenings and leaves that turn bronze in fall. Or we might opt for Wild Strawberry, which gives us early flowers, bright red runners and fruit we can eat.

Groundcover layer plants might include: Wild Strawberry, Wintergreen, Wild Geranium, Water Avens, Prairie Smoke, Wood Poppy, Common Blue Violet, Sideoats Grama, Bluejoint Grass, Canada Wild Rye, Bottlebrush Grass, Sweetgrass, Little Bluestem, Sand Dropseed, Prairie Dropseed, Bebb's Sedge, Graceful Sedge, Long-stalked Sedge, Plantainleaf Sedge, Fox Sedge, Bearberry, Bunchberry

Layer 2

Vignette

When we think of garden plants, we think of the vignette layer. This is where the flowers are. If you imagine a stage play, these plants are the actors. As the year goes on, they come and go, creating scenes of varying colours and textures. Not only does the vignette layer please the eye but it feeds wildlife through the seasons.

Vignette layer plants might include: Canadian Columbine, Lanceleaf Coreopsis, Butterfly Milkweed, Nodding Onion, Heart-leaved Aster, Hairy Beardtongue, Narrowleaf Mountain Mint, Black-eyed Susan, Spotted Joe-Pye Weed, Pearly Everlasting, Swamp Milkweed, Pale Purple Coneflower, Green-headed Coneflower, Water Avens, Cardinal Flower, Common Boneset, Large-leaved Aster, Royal Fern, Heath Aster, New England Aster

Layer 3

Structure

If the vignette is the actors, then the structure is the stage scenery. It could be formed of trees—some of which might be on the site already—shrubs, or even sculptures, paths or benches. Indeed, these human additions are what are known as “cues to care”. They help show our garden is intentional, which makes it more pleasing to the eye—and to our neighbours.

Structure layer plants might include: Smooth Serviceberry, Black Chokeberry, Red Osier Dogwood, Bush Honeysuckle, Virginia Creeper, Canadian Plum, Chokecherry, Fragrant Sumac, Staghorn Sumac, Smooth Rose, Swamp Rose, American Elderberry, Meadowsweet, Nannyberry, Highbush Cranberry, Tamarack, Black Cherry, Pussy Willow

1

Lawn conversions

Our prediction is that as the decade wears on, lawns, once a status symbol, will become anything but. This grass monoculture does little to help biodiversity, and yet it takes hours (and often gasoline) to maintain. We think there are better things to do with the green space outside your home or cottage.

4 Types of Natural Garden

2

Shorelines

Manicured grass and stone walls at the water's edge might look neat, but they're damaging the very thing we're here for: the lake. When we're here to play, we should play nicely with nature. Naturalized shorelines protect water quality, provide food and habitat for wildlife, and save our lakes for future generations.

3

Septic leach beds

What do you do with that flat piece of land above your septic tank? You can't build on it, you can't park on it... We say septic leach beds are a great way to get your feet wet in the world of natural gardens. You just have to make sure you pick the right plants to protect the workings of your septic system.



4

Forest edges

In Haliburton County, you're never more than a stick's throw from trees. That's why we think these ecotones, as they're called, are a great place for a natural garden. And what's more, putting the right plants there will grow neighbourhood nature like nowhere else because ecotones are biodiversity hotspots.

Groundcover

Wild Strawberry

Fragaria virginiana

As a groundcover, Wild Strawberry has it all: a sprinkle of colour early in the year, bright red runners and, of course, fruit you can eat. Common in Haliburton County, this is the groundcover layer's secret weapon.

Walter Siegmund, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons



Vignette

Black-eyed Susan

Rudbeckia hirta

Our most famous plant and a friend to Grounded, Black-eyed Susan brings a splash of colour in the first year after a garden is planted. It won't stick around forever, but it's generous with its seeds.

Krzysztof Ziarnek, Kenraiz, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons



Structure

Serviceberry

Amelanchier laevis

You'll welcome Serviceberry's white flowers in spring... as will the wildlife in your garden. You'll find this shrub at woodland edges throughout Ontario. It will soften the transition between forest and garden.

Vanessa Richins, About.com, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons



Groundcover

Bottlebrush Grass

Elymus hystrix

You can see how it got its name—those pale green spikes will pop up in summer. Bottlebrush Grass is great for those part-shaded areas, such as woodland edges. But it's pretty easy-going and will be happy in most soil conditions.

I, SB Johnny, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons



Vignette

Pale Purple Coneflower

Echinacea pallida

Pale Purple Coneflower loves a sunny spot, and once its taproot is established, it will look after itself. Its early summer flowers and late summer seeds are crowd pleasers, for humans and pollinators alike.

Liez, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Structure

Red Osier Dogwood

Cornus sericea

Red Osier Dogwood's stems are stunners against the white snow, when we could use a bit of colour. But it gives throughout the year, from white flowers in spring to blue fruit in late summer.

USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Herman, D.E. et al. 1996.



How a Natural Garden Develops

The first three years

Unlike traditional landscaping that demands quick fixes and flashes of colour, the natural garden unveils its beauty gradually, layer by layer, season by season. The successful gardener combines patience, a watchful eye, and a gentle hand.

Year One: Foundations

The garden's inaugural year focuses on the essentials—ruderal plants take the lead while the other plants busy themselves getting established by growing deep roots. It's a period less about visual pleasure and more about ecological groundwork.

Year Two: Transition and Emergence

As we enter the second year, the scene shifts. The initial wave of bloomers makes way for the garden's enduring species to come into their own. This is a transformative phase where the garden starts to sort itself out, moving from a rough sketch to a more defined portrait.

Year Three and Beyond: Flourishing Diversity

By the third year, the garden starts to become a robust ecosystem of diverse plant life. This mature garden requires minimal upkeep, thriving as a piece of the landscape, a showcase of resilience and beauty.

A New Beauty

Our demand for control ends up controlling us.

Landscaping has traditionally been all about neatness. But that is changing. As we venture further into the 21st Century, we're challenging that belief and embracing a different aesthetic, where we appreciate nature for being itself. Messy? No. Real? You bet.

A Tradition of Control

Gardening is often a reflection of how we act in the world in general. With its focus on neat lawns and exotic plants, traditional gardening is about displaying our control over nature, just as we do in every aspect of our society. That control leads to estrangement and a million harms because we stop understanding nature and the vital role it plays.

Allowing Plants to be Plants

Natural gardening is about reversing that shift. It's about understanding that if we are to survive in the 21st Century, we need to recognize that the rest of nature needs to thrive. It's about allowing plants to be plants, even if they challenge our societal view of how gardens should be.

Beauty for Everyone

That doesn't mean we should allow our gardens to run wild. They're gardens, not wildernesses. There's no harm in tending to our gardens, so they meet our needs as well as nature's needs. Smart natural gardeners use "cues to care", which show the design of the garden is intentional, even though we're allowing the plants to fully express themselves. We're paving the way for a new beauty that will be embraced by everyone.

About Simon

My name is Simon Payn and I help people create gardens that are beautiful for wildlife as well as for humans. Fascinated by nature and gardens as a child, I've found a way to combine both and to help fix our broken relationship with nature.

Education

University of Guelph

- Naturalizing and Restoring Landscapes
- Plant Identification
- Business Principles in Horticulture

Kelly D Norris (Author of *New Naturalism*)

- New Naturalism Academy

Benjamin Vogt (Author of *A New Garden Ethic and Prairie Up*)

- Various trainings



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  [grounded.haliburton](https://www.facebook.com/grounded.haliburton)

The Garden at Lucas House

The Garden at Lucas House was planted in 2023 and serves as an inspiration, demonstration and test garden for our work.

You're welcome to visit the garden at 123 Maple Avenue, Haliburton, next to the post office and across from the town hall.

You can follow updates about the garden at groundedgardens.ca.



The Grounded Process



Getting Started

Grounded designs and installs natural gardens using native plants. Our focus is on creating landscapes that are beautiful for humans and beneficial for nature.

1

Initial Meeting

Our first step is meeting with you right in your landscape. This is where we'll chat about your goals, ideas, and needs.

2

Design and Plants

On signing a design contract, we ask for a 50% nonrefundable deposit for the plants. Once that's sorted, we'll order your plants and give you a rough timeline for delivery or garden installation. Our designs are crafted on-site, which brings a few advantages: it allows us to tailor the design to your home or cottage's unique character, draw inspiration from the surrounding environment, and lets you have a say in any last-minute tweaks.

3

Installation and Initial Care

We handle the installation, unless you'd prefer to do the planting yourself. The prime months for planting are May to June and Labour Day to Thanksgiving.

4

First-Year Support

As part of our service, and to ensure your garden thrives, we offer at least two complimentary consultations during its critical first year, provided you follow our design. We'll walk through your garden with you, helping identify weeds, advise on watering and mulching, and discuss other care practices. It's all about guiding your garden from its early stages to a flourishing ecosystem over 3-4 years. This attention in the early days pays off, often as early as the second year. And remember, we're just an email or text away for any queries.

5

Your Garden Handbook

Gardens need care, and ours are designed to be low-maintenance. However, especially in the first few years, some attention is needed to ensure your garden continues to thrive. We will provide you with the information you need to take care of your garden.

Frequently-asked Questions

What is your philosophy on gardens?

Our philosophy centres on creating harmonious, sustainable gardens that connect people with nature and contribute positively to the local ecosystem.

What is the difference between a native plant garden and a traditional garden?

A native plant garden primarily uses plants indigenous to the region, which are adapted to the local climate and support local ecosystems, unlike traditional gardens that may use a mix of native and non-native plants.

What services do you offer?

We provide garden design and installation services, specializing in lawn replacement, shoreline naturalization, and septic system landscaping with native plants.

Are natural gardens more expensive than traditional gardens?

The initial cost may vary, but natural gardens often save money over time due to reduced maintenance, watering, and no need for fertilizers.

How do you select plants for my garden?

We carefully choose plants that are native to Haliburton County and surrounding areas and that suit your specific garden conditions, such as sunlight and moisture levels. We use a palette of plants that blooms throughout the growing season, produces attractive seed heads and foliage for outside the season, and creates a community of plant and animal life.

Can native plants survive Haliburton County's winters?

Yes, native plants are well adapted to local weather conditions, including our winters. They are resilient and can survive seasonal changes better than non-native species.

How do you handle pests and diseases in natural gardens?

Native plants are generally more resistant to pests and diseases. Some nibbling of your plants is expected and to be welcomed as a sign of a functioning ecosystem. Because we use a large number of plants, damage to individual plants is unlikely to be noticed and can indeed be beneficial in promoting healthy growth.

Can I have a lawn and a natural garden?

Absolutely! While we prefer to replace lawns with natural gardens, you don't need to go all-in. We can work on just one part of your landscape.

Do you provide educational resources for maintaining a native plant garden?

Yes, we offer guidance and resources to help you understand and steward your garden effectively. After installation, we provide a handbook listing all the plants installed and how to manage your garden in the months and years to come.

Where can I have more questions answered?

Visit our website at groundedgardens.ca or email hello@groundedgardens.ca.



Photo: Liana Mikah, Unsplash.

Coming Home

The real benefit of gardening for life.

I could tell you how a natural garden cuts back on tiresome maintenance. No more mowing. Much less weeding.

I could also tell you that using native plants in harmonious arrangements helps restore biodiversity to the planet.

And I could tell you that according to the biophilia hypothesis, being in nature is good for our mental health and overall wellbeing.

All of these things are true. But they don't get to the real benefit, which is this: natural gardening makes us more human. It restores us to our true place in the world. It makes us feel—finally—at home.

Whether it's plunging our hands into the soil and getting dirt under our nails or suddenly stopping still as we notice the scent of blossom or the flash of wings... when we're working in harmony with the rest of nature we're working in harmony with ourselves.

For too long, we've forgotten our true homes. We've become abstracted from the real world. Wouldn't it be nice to step outside on a summer morning and come back to what makes us... us?

Plants make us more human.

**A better
world starts
right outside
your door.**



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