

BORN TO BE WILD

Green thumb potter dedicates her Detroit garden to native plants

BY KHRISTI ZIMMETH
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“Bringing Nature Home” is the title of one of the many gardening books in one of the three Little Free Libraries that sit in front of Cheryl English’s home. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to do here,” the Detroit resident says of the title and of the philosophy behind her urban landscape.

English, who grew up in Grosse Pointe Park, purchased the modest bungalow in East English Village in 1995. When she moved in, her yard was limited to grass, six yews and “a cotoneaster bent on world domination,” she remembers with a laugh.

“My parents were both gardeners,” she explains. “My father was the guy who would have the first tomato on the block.” She followed her parents’ lead for a while, adding things such as bulbs until she gradually began to see a shift in her thinking as well as her planting. “I kept trying new and more unusual things and started looking for plants that benefitted the birds,” she explains. Around 2007, she began introducing plants that are primarily native to Michigan.

“I’ve always been interested in native plants, and my mother had a few in her garden,” gradually shifting to more natives as well as a more earth and wildlife-friendly focus. “It sort of crept up on me,” she says, adding that she started spending more and more time at her favorite sources, Wildtype Native Plant Nursery in Mason and Hidden Savanna in Kalamazoo. Her appreciation grew along with the plants, she says, eventually prompting a decision to devote her entire garden to native species. “We’ve been gardening for our own satisfaction for thousands of years and look where it’s gotten us,” she says of that commitment. “I decided to garden differently. My aesthetic has changed from how I grew up and from gardening for myself to gardening for the planet.”

Take a tour

On any given day, her garden buzzes with activity, from visiting bees and monarch butterflies to a variety of birds and insects. “There’s so much life here,” she says, adding, “it’s better than anything on television.” That activity is constant. “There’s no peak,” she says. “If you stop and listen there are times you can forget you’re in the city.”

Neat markers in the front and backyard identify a wide range of plants, in-



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Cheryl English surveys her urban oasis on Detroit’s east side. English, who grew up in Grosse Pointe Park, purchased the modest bungalow in East English Village in 1995.

cluding the native Michigan lily, spiderwort, “really important for bees,” she points out, liatris “which blooms from the top down,” she says, spice bush and her favorite shrub, common witch hazel. There’s also Joe Pye Weed, Northern Sea Oats, even something called “Rattlesnake Master,” a tall grass prairie plant that she has a few of and is especially proud of. “They’re both so happy I’m getting babies,” she says of one pair. “When they start reproducing you know you’re doing something right.”

She points out the different varieties on tours, when she might also mention her favorite bee (green metallic sweat bee) and

dn More online: To see a photo gallery of Cheryl English’s garden, go to

wasp (bald-faced hornet). She welcomes raccoons, opossums and other “animals we malign and don’t understand,” she explains, adding “part of what my garden is about is supporting these animals.” That sentiment extends to her business, Black Cat Pottery, which English operates from her basement and garage. Ceramic sunflowers, leaf-shaped bird baths and birdhouses — many of which are sold at art fairs and in local home and garden stores — can also be found throughout her gar-

den, complementing the natural wonders. “What we are doing with the birdhouses is replacing habitat that humans have destroyed,” she explains.

Tours are offered by appointment and as annual events, with the next one scheduled for Aug. 19. English also speaks on native plants and her garden, including upcoming events in Livonia on Aug. 9 and one in Mount Clemens on Sept. 20. More information on her tours, talks and upcoming art fairs, including this weekend’s Stony Creek Art Fair and next weekend’s Belle Isle Art Fair, is available at her website (blackcatpottery.com). English also consults with clients on residential and



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Mini ceramic sunflowers in all hues from English’s Black Cat Pottery compliment the garden’s plantings.



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Sunflowers with human faces from Black Cat Pottery survey Cheryl English’s backyard garden.



Don Schulte

A *chamaecrista fasciculata*, also called a Partidge pea, blooms in English’s garden. There’s also Joe Pye Weed, Northern Sea Oats, even something called “Rattlesnake Master,” a tall grass prairie plant.



Don Schulte

A *lobelia cardinalis*, also known as the cardinal flower, provides vivid color and is a native plant. Neat markers in the front and backyard identify a wide range of plants.



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English’s backyard is the size of a small standard city lot. “I can’t make my neighbors understand what I’m doing here,” she says of her native plant garden.

commercial garden designs and wildlife habitats. “Everyone is welcome” to her garden, she points out. “The plants are fascinating to me. They each have a story and I love sharing them.”

Grow your own

Not everyone appreciates her natural landscape. “I can’t make my neighbors understand what I’m doing here,” she explains. She says that those who tour her garden often have what she calls “an a-ha moment” when the light goes on and they begin to understand. “That’s the stuff I live for,” she says. “The garden is my happy place. It asks nothing of me, but rewards me every day.”

Anyone can start small, she says, adding a few native plants to their own plot. “Take your time, do it in pieces,” she says. She recommends starting with things you know, such as eastern Columbine and

purple coneflower. Good sources include reputable nurseries and places such as the Cranbrook plant rescue.

Through her tours, her “strictly curated” garden-focused little free libraries and her advocacy for the natural world in all its forms, English hopes to help others see that even the smallest shift in thinking and planting can have a huge impact if enough people do it. She worries “about all the things we’ve lost, and all the things we will lose,” if things don’t change, she says, adding that she’s seeing “fewer of everything,” including bees, birds, butterflies and caterpillars, in her garden. “My whole thing is trying to get the message out about gardening differently,” she says. “All I can do is model the behavior I’d like to see in the world.”

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A sign in the garden declares that it is a native plant butterfly garden.



David Guralnick / The Detroit News

Three little free libraries — including one for just children — are dedicated to gardening in front of English’s Detroit home.