

New Words Spring Up

I'm not speaking of the subtle changes in familiar words that have acquired new or different meanings as they have been used by specific sub-sets of people, i.e. engineers, teenagers, lobbyists. Some words are more the refining of understandable usage such as agroforestry.

Forestry we know: agriculture we know. Agroforestry according to a recent issue of "Virginia Forest Landowner Update" is defined as "the deliberate combination and management of trees, crops, and livestock to enhance and diversify production and improve conservation." John Munsell, Virginia Tech Forestry Extension Specialist, goes on to explain that agroforestry is not Christmas tree plantations or cattle wandering in a forest. It is the integration of multiple crops on the same landscape, intensively managed.

The use of agroforestry by home gardeners is seen in the increasing number of edible species that will produce food without great amounts of sunshine. Mushrooms of course come to mind as compatible with forest edges but also there are shrubs that are not only pretty but produce good things to eat – filberts, gooseberries, jujubes, elderberries, persimmons, some varieties of blueberries and wild strawberries can be grown in a woodland garden.

An older term, 'farmscaping' has been around for about twenty years. (Can you tell I've been cleaning out my files?) Farmscaping is the use, among other practices, of plant diversity to attract good insects to reduce the need for pesticides. Soil management remains essential to provide the fertility and the environment that reduces soil-borne pests.

Still another old and familiar play on the word, 'landscaping' is bayscaping, quite simply the use of plants in waterfront property that enhances the health of the Chesapeake Bay. You don't have to actually be able to see the water from your property to use the practices that avoid harming the bay. As rain washes over all of us in this watershed, it carries nutrients and chemicals to drains, groundwater, and eventually to the bay.

The big plus in bayscaping is the use of plants that require minimal trimming, watering, fertilizing, or pesticide treatments. These are unfussy natives essentially, accustomed by time to be productive here. 'Native' plant lists occasionally contain well adapted 'come-heres' but purists prefer that list to contain only those plants that greeted Columbus when he discovered America. Since he never ventured to Virginia, you might prefer to use John Smith as your model?

The key to limiting the 'come-heres' is their ability to remain non-invasive. Over time it has become easier to design a home landscape using natives as more and more nurseries have them available. Even commercial enterprises offering worldwide plant selections will often list the place of origin as a guide.

Another guideline to the introduction of non-natives into your garden might be their ability to attract beneficial insects and feed local birds. Perhaps the single greatest urge to use bayscaping plants rather than elements of European design, has been the savings in time and money. A formal garden is a drain on time and resources so we embrace the more casual appearance of a native landscape.

February Tips

Just in case you are pulling out the ghosts of vegetables past from your raised beds, this is an interesting suggestion. Some of you I am sure are still eating greens from your beds so are not yet planning to disturb them. You have found that it is easy to arrange a Rube Goldberg contraption to protect food against frost. But if your beds are naked it may seem counterintuitive to be told to leave them alone. Experts are now saying, "Do not re-dig". The soil in those beds has become a complicated web of life with all manner of micronutrients.

Once you have built up the soil in your beds do not disturb it further than the removal of old roots. An inch or two of mature compost on the soil surface is all the preparation needed. To protect the surface until time to plant, straw is helpful. Gardeners with an array of beds may find a bale of straw will keep the paths between them mud free. A little straw goes a long way and enriches the soil as it decomposes.