

Welcome to Matrix Gardening –a synonym for slightly messy?

Is matrix planting an old/new idea? Thrifty gardeners seize on expensive books when they appear in discount catalogs. A recent acquisition of mine is “The Self-sustaining Garden - the guide to matrix planting” by Peter Thompson. I realize that ‘self-sustaining’ was the hook, and a challenge because most of us doubt that such a garden exists. The author has the background – Kew Gardens, botanist, world-wide study of wildflowers- to enable him to free us from the compulsion to turn gardening into manic outdoor housekeeping.

I was convinced I needed this book because it is a 2007 publication of Timber Press whose selections are substantially informative. A further reason was the word ‘matrix’ in the title. I had thought that was generally a math term although I did remember matrices was the parent word for the ‘mats’ used to create ads in newspapers back in the old hot lead days. However, in gardening a matrix is the environment in which companion plants thrive to create a mutually supportive community.

Peter Thompson’s book outlines the processes to follow in the creation of these self-sustaining plant communities. From the many pictures in the book, the result of matrix planting is not an immaculate landscape but complex entanglements of foliage, shapes, and flower colors.

Briefly the crucial elements in sustaining a matrix garden are first, a plant mix with compatible requirements of soil, site, sun, etc. Secondly, time is needed to allow the plants to settle in and make themselves at home. Lastly, is competition, understood as the mechanism where incompatible or unsuitable plants are eliminated to maintain a balance of those plants that will thrive. This book is a keeper.

MORE WORDS

ELSO! No, it is not someone’s name. The letters stand for El Nino Southern Oscillation and it refers to those two factors in the Pacific Ocean that are important influences on the weather patterns of a specific year. El Nino we are more accustomed to hearing about as it affects the winds that determine a lot of our country’s weather. Come to find out there is also a counterpart to Southern Oscillation called North Atlantic Oscillation, NAO, that may have caused a change in the wind patterns in our area over the past few decades.

A recent article in the Chesapeake Bay Journal reports that a research scientist at Old Dominion University has suggested that one of the realities complicating the cleanup of the Bay has been the change of spring and summer wind patterns over the Bay. Rather than coming from the south these winds are currently westerly. Unfortunately, the action of these west winds is not as efficient as that of the south winds. When the wind blows from the south the oxygen-rich waters on the top are mixed with the oxygen-starved bottom waters, refreshing them.

This change may be part of the reason the health of the Bay has not improved despite considerable lessening of the dead-zones caused by excessive nutrients entering the Bay. The change in the wind direction seems to be related to the strength of the NAO, which is a measure of the difference in air pressure between Iceland and the Azores, a figure that fluctuates over the years.

None of these bits of information give a final explanation of the many problems involved in the restoration of the Bay. There are few simple answers to most questions and the recovery of the Bay is of such complexity that the solutions will be slow in coming. Because there are so many millions of us living in this watershed, every small effort each one of us makes to curb pollution will truly make a difference.

BANANAS!

You may wish to have your own banana grove. Some species are not hardy here and must be planted in tubs and toted inside, displacing furniture and family in the process. Other species resent being cut back to such an extent that they curl up and die. There is a happy choice for here! *Musa basjoo* suckers from its base so if the original plant gets too large for a comfortable fit, you can cut it back and welcome the offshoots.