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Restoring native plants in the environment

K-State extension specialist shares benefits, offers tips on creating a rewilded landscape

By Lisa Moser, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — For many, a walk in nature is more than just exercise: It fills them with a sense of peace. Along with the benefits for people, creating a green space is also beneficial to the world, says Kansas State University horticulture extension specialist Cynthia Domenghini.

And one way to create these spaces is through rewilding.

“Rewilding is taking the human-created concrete landscapes developed in shopping areas, universities and neighborhoods and turning them back into more natural settings,” Domenghini said. “By doing this we can restore local ecosystems and reduce the disconnect that exists between people and nature.”

She said that instead of people driving a distance to experience nature, rewilding allows people to have nature near them no matter where they live.

“With rewilding you are making a conscious plant decision that is environmentally appropriate for the landscape, which means they are going to require less watering, and once they are established, less management,” Domenghini said.

Other benefits include habitats for wildlife, improved soil health and increased biodiversity, which promotes beneficial insects.

Domenghini said some people may wonder if this environment creates a surplus of weeds.

“How many weeds can you tolerate is a question that people will have to decide, but rewilded landscapes can be managed to remove the plants you don’t want there,” Domenghini said.

For those who want to have a positive impact on the environment, Domenghini said that adding more plants to an area can have many benefits for the earth, including greater carbon sequestration, improved air quality and reduced erosion from allowing natural waterways to occur.

There are also mental health benefits, Domenghini said.

“Green spaces provide places for relaxation and socialization that can improve a person’s mood and mental well-being. We just feel differently when we are close to nature,” Domenghini said. “Also, returning landscapes to their natural habitats can connect people with their historic cultures, providing more mental health benefits.”

Steps to Rewilding

For those wanting to try rewilding, Domenghini offers the following tips:

- Look for plants that are native to your environment.
- Select plants that attract pollinators.
- Limit the use of pesticides and herbicides to keep from harming bees and beneficial insects.
- Be creative in ways to incorporate green spaces, such as window boxes, porch plants and green walls.

“There are many options for creating green spaces that don’t require you to have an expansive backyard,” Domenghini said.

Her last bit of advice was to turn a landscaping challenge into an opportunity. For example, if there is water runoff going through an area, capture the water and turn it into a rain garden. She also shared that food waste can be turned into beneficial compost for the landscape.

Domenghini said: “Rewilding is often thought of as a large effort in the city to create green space, but it can be done anywhere.”

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K-State Research and Extension is a short name for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, a program designed to generate and distribute useful knowledge for the well-being of Kansans. Supported by county, state, federal and private funds, the program has county extension offices, experiment fields, area extension offices and regional research centers statewide. Its headquarters is on the K-State campus in Manhattan. For more information, visit www.ksre.ksu.edu. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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