Planting on the Wild Side
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The Nature of Planting

What does naturalistic planting really mean?
Does it mean a planting evokes nature, perhaps only as an illusion? Does it mimic nature? Does it translate natural function into a beautiful result?

Gardens are refugia for life. The smallest moments we treasure as gardeners are only a glimpse of the biodiversity that can thrive in our midst.

Meadow Nord at Three Oaks. This summer I began the first chapter of a new half-acre garden at my new home.

Naturalistic Planting Primer

Plants are up to something. Get to know them.

Plants are social creatures.

Embrace change on all timescales.

Making Gardens: Function, Structure and Content

Techniques

Horticultural Techniques focus on successfully cultivating plants and creating beautiful planting designs.
- Planting from plugs (i.e. dig many small holes)
- The Oudolf formula: 9-11-13
- Trust foliage
- Revel in what persists

Ecological Techniques focus on improving the overall durability of the landscape and impact multiple species in scope.
- Giving back (mowing and burning)
- Plant densely and diversely
- Leveraging competition
- Stress as an asset

Recipes

Close to Home—Sometimes we inherit the bones of an existing landscape, including plants and structures. A preexisting foundation planting doesn't limit the opportunities for wilder planting, but instead gives a strong frame within which to work.

Open—Planting the ever-popular meadow aesthetic requires embracing and maximizing open exposures.

Under Cover—Shade, whether organic or not, is the predominant variable in modern landscapes, especially in cities. Cover is reinforced in two planes—canopy and understory.

Edge Effects—Not all landscapes are so categorical or offer discrete places to plant template gardens. The edges and boundaries often require thinking outside traditional planting plans. Overlapping conditions of exposure and soil create niche opportunities for dynamic, yet stable planting schemes.