

## The Miramichi Naturalist

### Natural Gardens by Leonel Richard

Ask a gardener if he is winning or losing the battle against pests and chances are you will hear the honest answer that he or she is not. After millions of years of natural evolution, the plants and bugs that plague our gardening efforts have learned to change quickly to keep ahead of the competition. It's not the strongest dandelion that is likely to survive but the one with the weak stem which breaks off easily at the crown allowing the root to re-grow its leaves while you're not looking. Like most invasive species, the dandelion has evolved to deal with the actions of humans and it's still evolving. The most important trait for survival is the ability to change.

When plant breeders work on better tomato, their efforts are concentrated on getting a plant which grows fast and has dependable fruit without blemishes. No attention is given to making it a strong plant able to propagate itself and able to deal with weeds and pests. We plant them in our gardens and they are facing the enemy unprepared. Sure they can reward us with beautiful red tomatoes but not without our care. If left alone they would not last very long.

Our mastery of nature is only temporary. Take a natural forest with mature trees, a mossy floor and all the animals that dwell there and ask anybody if he or she finds it beautiful and you likely won't find anyone who doesn't. If left alone, in ten or a hundred years it will be even more beautiful. Now take that forest and build a golf course on it. In a few years with its green grass and ponds one would say that that is beautiful also. The difference is that the forest is in a balanced state and no maintenance is needed to keep it a forest. The golf course on the other hand needs a lot of maintenance to keep it looking good. The grass must be mowed or it will grow too tall. Artificial fertilizers must be applied to replace the natural fertilizer such as leaf litter and decaying plants you would find in nature. Pesticides must be sprayed to control insects and weeds that benefit from the lack of diversity.



Bog Laurel



Red Oak



Virginia Creeper

While we sweat and toil to make our yards look the way we want them to look, another force is opposing our efforts with no effort at all. This force of nature is not mean or vengeful it's just there. It's what it does. After millions of years of evolution, organisms can't be expected to stop doing the very thing that has made them what they are today. It is nature - an ecological wonder beyond our full understanding. Organisms from the most simple to the most complex live in balance. In the grand scheme of things, any disaster whether natural or man-made, interrupts the balance only temporarily.

Whether we are oblivious to the inevitable or whether we accept it and yet still vow to put up the good fight, we put in the effort and from time to time we have small victories.

Fortunately for us we have hundreds of native plants to add to our gardens. The Coltsfoot makes an excellent ground cover where shade or dappled sunlight mimics its natural habitat. Cinnamon Fern and Ostrich Fern are good for landscaping as are most ferns for that matter. Winter Holly and Hobblebush make beautiful shrubs for foundation planting and the options for native shade trees are numerous with the Red Oak being the undisputed king. For sunny locations the choices are more limited although the native roses, the Virginia Creeper, the Bog Laurel and the Frost Grape are good plants to start with.