

## Go Green in Your Garden! The Backyard Habitat Program Comes to the Coves

“Biological invasion by plants is a worldwide phenomenon and a leading cause of biodiversity loss, second only to the destruction of natural habitats” (Environment Canada, 2005). In the Coves designated Environmentally Significant Area (ESA), this problem is all too familiar. Approximately 30% of all species in the Coves are non-native and new species are still being introduced.

Most of the Coves ESA is privately owned. Action to improve the ecological health of the ponds relies upon the involvement of local residents and businesses. Through our Backyard Habitat Program, Friends of the Coves is helping the Coves community bring nature into their own backyards. We are offering natural landscape consultation, naturalization workshops, and native trees, shrubs and wildflowers, all free of charge, in the area of the Coves ESA.

A goal of this program is to enhance biodiversity within the Coves. By planting a variety of native plants, more diverse food and habitat conditions will be available to support diverse wildlife. Invasive plants will often reduce this diversity. Such species will move into a natural ecosystem and make it their new home. With no natural predators, these invasive species can easily spread and become almost impossible to eliminate. Many of the exotic plants growing in the Coves began with escaped garden plants, most times without the knowledge of the gardener. Educating people on which garden plants to avoid and how to create a green garden are key to preventing this spread.

European buckthorn in Euston Park is a prime example of an invasive non-native species. Within the park this prolific plant has established a canopy under which very little grows. The seeds of buckthorn survive for 7 years and when simply cut down, the bush vigorously re-sprouts. It is now invading Euston Park and, if left uncontrolled, will impact our ongoing naturalization project. People often plant European buckthorn for its thicket forming ability, but there are many native options such as red cedar, which will provide privacy and also act as a windbreak. In addition, red cedars provide excellent food and shelter for a number of birds and mammals such as the northern flicker and white-tailed deer.

Another problematic invader within the Coves area is the Norway maple. This tree is commonly planted for its hardiness in urban areas, but its shallow roots and dense canopy make it difficult for other plants to grow nearby. The keys from Norway maples that have been planted as yard trees, blow into the Coves ESA, take root and threaten the health of our rare plant communities such as the mature black walnut stand. An alternative tree would be our native sugar maple. Although similar in form to Norways, sugar maples provide ample light for other plants and also make a good food source or nesting site for cardinals, evening and rose-breasted grosbeaks, and goldfinches, for starters.

It is quite often the case that choosing to plant native species over non-native species in a garden will encourage wildlife to visit your yard. For example, a cedar waxwing will feed on American highbush cranberries long before it would consider eating a European highbush cranberry. It is also important to remember that when selecting species of native plants, there are many cultivars and varieties available, which are not truly indigenous species. Do not be fooled, as this can also influence how valuable the plant is for wildlife. The Friends of the Coves will encourage garden centres to stock native plants and will provide people with a list of which nurseries are the most reliable sources.

These examples clearly show how important communication and education are in the effort to enhance biodiversity. By engaging people to ask questions and by informing the community, we can build a stronger foundation in naturalization. Our program is currently focused upon the residents and businesses adjacent to the Coves ESA, and includes the above services and resources. We plan to continue the program in the spring and to focus on related benefits of energy conservation, schoolyard naturalization, chemical-free gardening, composting, and water conservation with rain barrels.

This program is carried out with the generous support of Environment Canada, the City of London, London Community Foundation, ReForest London 150 and Upper Thames River Conservation Authority. Program delivery relies upon support and participation of volunteers, sponsors and partners. Please contact Vanessa Kinsley at 640-5397 or [contact@thecoves.ca](mailto:contact@thecoves.ca) if you are interested in participating.

The Friends of the Coves Subwatershed Inc. is a registered charity established by members of the community that share a commitment to improving the health of the Coves Ponds and the lands that drain into them.

Make a special effort to avoid selecting these invasive species on the Coves Subwatershed:

- Norway maple
- European buckthorn
- Periwinkle
- Garlic mustard
- Eurasian water-milfoil
- Tartarian honeysuckle
- Lily-of-the-valley
- Yellow flag iris
- White mulberry
- Multiflora, Japanese rose
- Purple loosestrife
- Ground-ivy
- Yarrow

- European highbush cranberry

What you can do to begin your backyard naturalization:

- Select native plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife
- Build bird and butterfly houses
- Avoid using chemical fertilizers and pesticides
- Don't dump yard waste into natural areas
- Install a rain barrel
- Use a push lawn mower
- Use natural compost to improve your soils
- Plant trees to shade in summer and provide a windbreak in winter
- Find out what grows in your yard
- Take action to control invasive plants in your yard



Cedar waxwing on highbush cranberry  
Photo by: Gillian Barr



Common buckthorn  
Elizabeth J. Czarapata

**Aside from learning how invasive plants can become damaging to natural areas, it is equally important to educate people on the benefits of native species versus non-native species for wildlife**