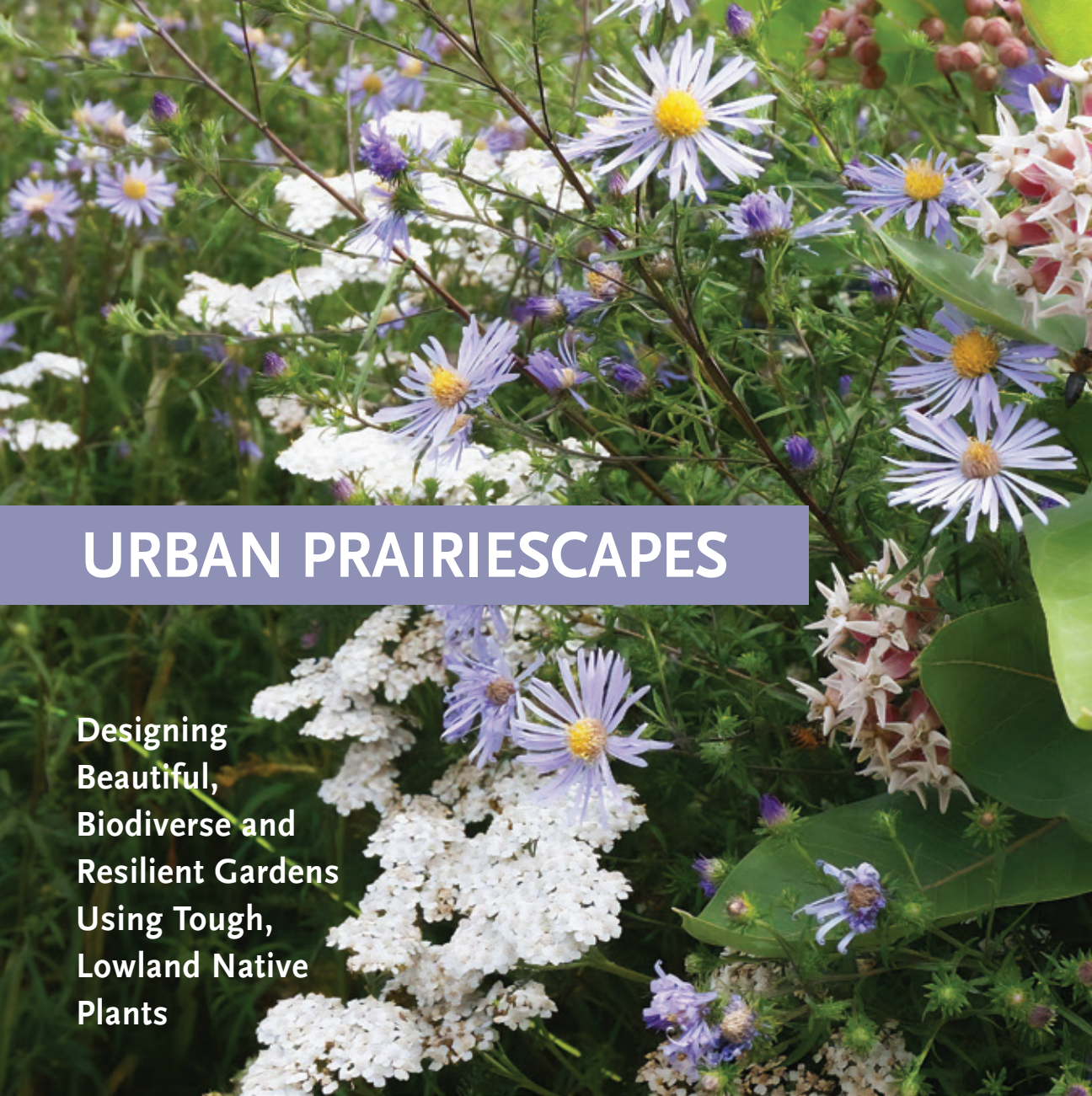




URBAN PRAIRIESCAPES

Designing Beautiful, Biodiverse and Resilient Gardens Using Tough, Lowland Native Plants

BY SHANNON NICHOL

From public botanical gardens to Belltown balcony planters, my colleagues and I at the landscape architecture firm GGN are going small and local for our latest creative experiment. Our Meadowshop Initiative (ggnltd.com/meadowshop) includes a new service to help homeowners stylishly re-wild the smaller residential gardens that comprise the great quilt of nandina-spangled urban green space in our home region.

The Meadowshop Initiative is largely

informed by years of personal gardening and propagation experiments conducted by me and GGN colleagues as we tried, failed, and eventually managed to forge some more aesthetically pleasing and durable strategies for creating lush, heat-tolerant, wildlife-friendly and practical gardens made up of 100 percent Pacific Northwest (PNW) native plants.

Artful Native Design: A Chicago Story

Though we didn't realize it at the time, the



LEFT: One of Meadowshop Initiatives' garden-tested combinations of sun-loving native prairie plants, featuring western yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), Pacific aster (*Symphyotrichum chilense*), and showy milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*). (Photo by Tess Schiavone/GGN)

BELOW: The author's home garden in spring, featuring native vine maple (*Acer circinatum*) and, in the container, shore pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *contorta* 'Willow Creek'). Micro-prairie plantings, with great camas (*Camassia leichtlinii*) and cow parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*) in bloom, surround the focal trees. (Photo by Shannon Nichol/GGN)



Meadow Initiative actually began in Chicago in the year 2000. One of our first major projects—designed from our then three-person office in Pioneer Square's One Yesler Building—was the Lurie Garden in Chicago's Millennium Park. Our rebellious-at-the-time competition entry proposed bringing Chicago's authentic native plants into a space designated in the competition brief as a "world-class botanical garden" full of "rare and unusual plants found nowhere else in the world."

We figured, not without some cheerful edge, that Chicago's own native plants—and even those from that very piece of ground beneath the Park—were about as "world-class" and "rare and unusual" as you could get for a central downtown site that would receive millions of visitors each year.

To our great surprise—and to the credit of the forward-thinking jury of Chicago leaders and art patrons—this notion, in a carefully sculpted and detailed form, won the competition to



Close up of the author's prairie planting in fall, featuring tufted hair grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), *Festuca roemeria*, lavender-flowered seaside daisy (*Erigeron glaucus*), and yellow-blooming Oregon sunshine (*Eriophyllum lanatum*) at the base of the vine maple. (Photo by Shannon Nichol/GGN)

design the Lurie Garden. Of course, having the great Piet Oudolf as the perennial plantsman on our team certainly helped our chances. (At that time, he had not yet worked in the U.S. but was already using Chicago's under-the-radar prairie natives in revolutionary ways in Europe.) Piet's involvement, along with a garden-management endowment from the Lurie family, ensured that the Garden's perennial layer could perform and evolve indefinitely as the successful ambassador for dynamic, artful native planting that it was intended to be.

PNW Natives: Overlooked at Home

After the subsequent experience of watching the Lurie Garden inspire gardeners and nurseries across Chicagoland to shift strongly toward the beauty of their own native plants, my colleagues and I were excited to help spark this same effect through our projects in other North American cities. The Northeast, Texas and California—in that order—would see those popular gardening shifts in subsequent years, and we found that convincing folks in these regions to celebrate the culture and nature of their local plants became easier and easier as the years progressed.

There was, however, one region that stood out as a stark, perplexing exception to this progress in popular gardening's ecological and aesthetic gear-meshing. This region is GGN's home: the Pacific Northwest. We

have been as yet unable to help inspire a visible, popular shift of thinking and common gardening here on our home turf. This tough nut to crack continues to motivate our creative work—and keeps me up at night.

Why does my home region (which is full of kind, creative folks who moved here to be closer to nature, and who self-identify as environmentally conscious and science-driven) rank, statistically, among the least-successful areas in the country with regard to native plant availability in nurseries and the use of these plants in residential and commercial landscapes?

With my own head and yard happily full of the rich and sophisticated PNW native flora, insects and birds that I grew up with and enjoy coming home to, this has been a head-scratcher. I have designed projects with—and continue to learn about—these oddly overlooked plants for 28 years, and have propagated and gardened with them in my own gardens for more than 20 years. Unsurprisingly, like all regions of the world, ours has communities of gorgeous plants suited for pretty much any gardening situation—including “hell” strips, side yards, and crummy, fill-derived urban soils!

A Native Plant Commitment

As we now somehow find ourselves to be one of the largest independent landscape architecture firms in the Pacific Northwest, GGN has recognized that we have the responsibility to not only



Green sweat bee on the inflorescence of a western yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*). (Photo by Tess Schiavone/GGN)



Sea blush (*Valeriana congesta*) blooming in spring. Meadowshop uses this adaptable annual herb as a “green mulch” to help its prairie plantings get established. (Photo by Tess Schiavone/GGN)

demonstrate a better way forward in our local projects but also to try to make native-plant gardening more accessible and desirable to the public. In fact, in the context of the sixth mass extinction and the rapid loss of birds and insects in our region, we have the urgent obligation to do so.

Therefore, we have made it a priority to commit to using 100 percent native plants in all of our public and prominent commercial projects, and to start doing more residential and small-scale projects in the Pacific Northwest that are relatable, more affordable, and replicable for homeowners.

Clearly, more examples are needed of native gardens that meet certain aesthetic aspirations, so that folks can expand consideration of native plants from their hikes in the alpine wilderness to their backyards, balconies, sidewalk strips and pots on the porch. For us, this has meant breaking into a sector—residential garden design—that we had largely “skipped” as a firm (outside of a series of mostly confidential, large, native residential gardens that we’ve been privileged to experiment collaboratively in and learn from).

That’s where the Meadowship Initiative comes in. But the challenges have not been insignificant, as there is particular confusion and skepticism in the Seattle area about our indigenous flora. Some writers, nurseries and authors still confuse even well-educated homeowners on “pollinator gardens”—modeled,

ironically, on replicating the species and aesthetics of Northeastern native prairie gardens. The same goes for “sustainable gardens,” which may require less water but are mostly made up of plants from other bioregions. These gardens are a step forward—and often beautiful—but host few of the native insects (in particular, the crucially important larvae of butterflies and moths) in our imperiled food web.

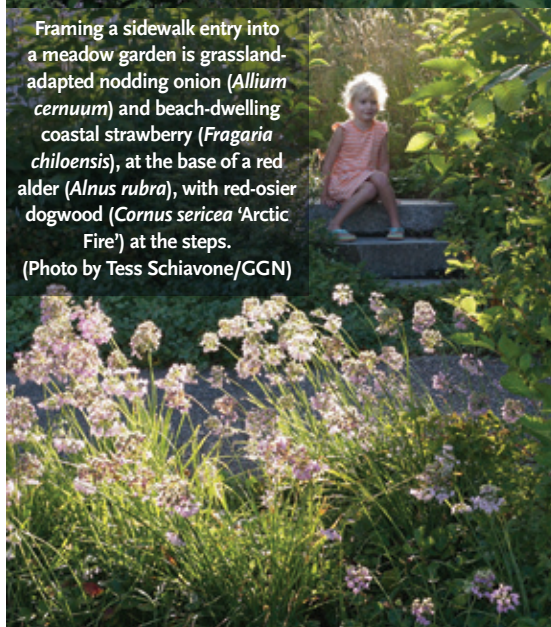
Developing PNW Meadow Mixes

With the goal of creating a new kind of quilt, made up of many small, buzzing pieces of restored PNW character and habitat, we have developed and are continuously refining some simple, layered planting mixes and methods for smaller urban and suburban beds and gardens.

Since many folks already know—and perhaps only know—the region’s shade-dependent, forest-understory plants from their hikes in the less-developed foothills and peaks of the Cascades, our main focus has been on re-introducing the region’s lesser-known communities of lowland, heat-tolerant plants, as well as early-successional plants that happily colonize bare, disturbed ground. We have replaced bark mulches and dated, industrial “mature plant spacing” with dense, small-sized/quick-growing plant matrixes, which include over-seeded annuals and ephemeral elements that quickly cover bare ground and yield to longer-lived, slower-growing partners over time.



In this shady, sunken garden by GGN, moist woodland natives such as *Heracleum lanatum*, *Rubus spectabilis*, goat's beard (*Aruncus dioicus*) and devil's club (*Oplopanax horridus*) are under-planted with *Deschampsia cespitosa*.
(Photo by GGN)



Framing a sidewalk entry into a meadow garden is grassland-adapted nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*) and beach-dwelling coastal strawberry (*Fragaria chiloensis*), at the base of a red alder (*Alnus rubra*), with red-osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea* 'Arctic Fire') at the steps.
(Photo by Tess Schiavone/GGN)

We've been thrilled to find that the right mixes of native meadow and colonizing plants not only tolerate but also thrive in the hot, disturbed and exposed sites that have vexed many PNW home gardeners. They joyously prefer these conditions! These plants, in the right formats, can create respectably weed-suppressing "rugs" of pleasingly even texture — plus, in many cases, beautiful seasonal flowers.

Examples of species we've found invaluable in quickly bringing quick lushness to tough urban sites include *Achillea millefolium*,

Deschampsia cespitosa (given a touch of shade or moisture), *Eriophyllum lanatum*, *Erigeron glaucus*, *Festuca roemerii*, *Fragaria vesca*, *Grindelia integrifolia*, *Rubus parviflorus*, *Symphoricarpos albus*, *Symphyotrichum subspicatum* and *Valeriana congesta*.

Stoloniferous and reseeding plants, when allowed to do what they excel at, are joyously robust colonizers that don't make us (or our native insect and bird neighbors) wait for acres of bare mulch to biodegrade over time or for slow-growing woody ornamentals to mature. Using them requires a dynamic approach to managing plants, but this should not be a strange way for us to garden anymore.

As well-intentioned, ever-amateur, and aesthetically picky gardeners in our own yards, the GGN team has tried, failed and learned over many years in order to get to the place on the learning continuum where we can feel confident in sharing our passion and methods with other homeowners and gardeners in our beloved home town. We are looking forward to seeing if others are willing to join us in this effort of collective learning, iteration, exchange and enjoyment. 🌱

SHANNON NICHOL is a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Her design work includes the Lurie Garden at Millennium Park, the new Burke Museum landscape, and the UW's Lower Rainier Vista. Learn more at ggnltd.com.