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Story by
LAURA RAPPAPORT

Photographs by
EMILY DeBOLT



A bright patch of native plants greets visitors to Fiddlehead Creek Farm and Native Plant Nursery in Hartford.

Going Native

Gardening with Native Plants Keeps Invasives at Bay

As the ephemeral spring wildflowers start poking up from the last crusts of snow, now is a good time to think about adding native plants to your home garden.

Instead of burning bush, try highbush blueberry. Trade yellow flag iris for blue. Plant a patch of hoary skullcap or foamflower. These New York natives are better for our region's overall ecology than alien ornamental plants, according to gardening experts.

Botanists consider a plant native if it was indigenous to a region at the time Europeans arrived in the New World. Today, those very natives help sustain the natural life cycle of insects, birds and mammals that live off them.

Native plants are beautiful and hardy. And as development pressure increases, adding them to our own backyards is vital. When land is cleared to make room for houses and malls, the contiguous habitat and migration paths of thousands of species of animals are destroyed, and the

American landscape becomes increasingly homogenous.

"Homeowners' landscapes are becoming more and more important as the larger natural landscape is fragmented," says Emily DeBolt, the enterprising 29-year-old owner of Fiddlehead Creek Farm and Native Plant Nursery in Hartford, Washington County. "Your backyard is important as we lose nature. The butterflies and the birds need places to go."

Standing 5 feet 10 inches tall, with bright blue eyes, a flowing brown ponytail and an engaging smile, DeBolt is passionate about ecology, landscape, photography, and her 17-acre farm and nursery in Hartford, a 35-minute drive from Saratoga Springs. She hopes homeowners will catch the "go native" bug that's been circulating in the gardening world for some time.

Her nursery specializing in New York and Adirondack natives is a natural offshoot of DeBolt's day job as education director for the Lake George Association, where she helps homeowners design

gardens that respect the land and the lake. Native plants make excellent shoreline buffers. Their deeper roots slow storm runoff and hold soil in place, preventing erosion. The plants also take up nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous, which are bad for lakes and rivers, but good for plants. For instance, a typical lawn grass has roots of just a few inches, while native bunch grass such as Little Bluestem has eight-foot-deep roots: a much better choice for a lakeshore "lawn."

DeBolt and her husband Chris started Fiddlehead Creek in 2009, when she realized that most local garden centers don't have a ready supply of native New York plants.

"So I just said, 'Why don't we start growing some?' It was a very steep learning curve." Three years on, they're approaching the top of that curve. A spring visit to the nursery—alive with rows of potted native plants, fields of hops, roaming chickens, and dogs—shows the depth of love and care the DeBolts have for the land and nature. Emily knows technology, too, as her color-

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ful, informative website and blog attest.

A Virginian, DeBolt moved to the region in 2006 after she and Chris graduated from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, where DeBolt earned her master's degree in environmental interpretation and education. (While not tending his fields of hops, Chris works as chief of staff for 112th district Assemblyman Tony Jordan.)

DeBolt buys her plants as tiny plugs from regional wholesalers. She and a small band of helpers pot them up and cover them to winter-over outside, saving energy and space—no hothouse heating bills or maintenance involved.

"They're tough—the idea is that they can make it through the winter," DeBolt says.

DeBolt's position on this is in line with the state and national native gardening movement.

"Native plants are important for a sense of regional identity," says Andrea DeLong-Amaya, director of horticulture for the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas. "It's important to have Texas look like Texas and New York look like New York."

Native plants also help combat overly hardy invasive species that upset the natural way of the woods, pushing out native wildflowers and decimating the insect and bird population that rely on them.

"A few invasives are such a proven threat to natural ecosystems that they should not be planted, period," says Karin Verschoor of the

Native Plant Alternatives

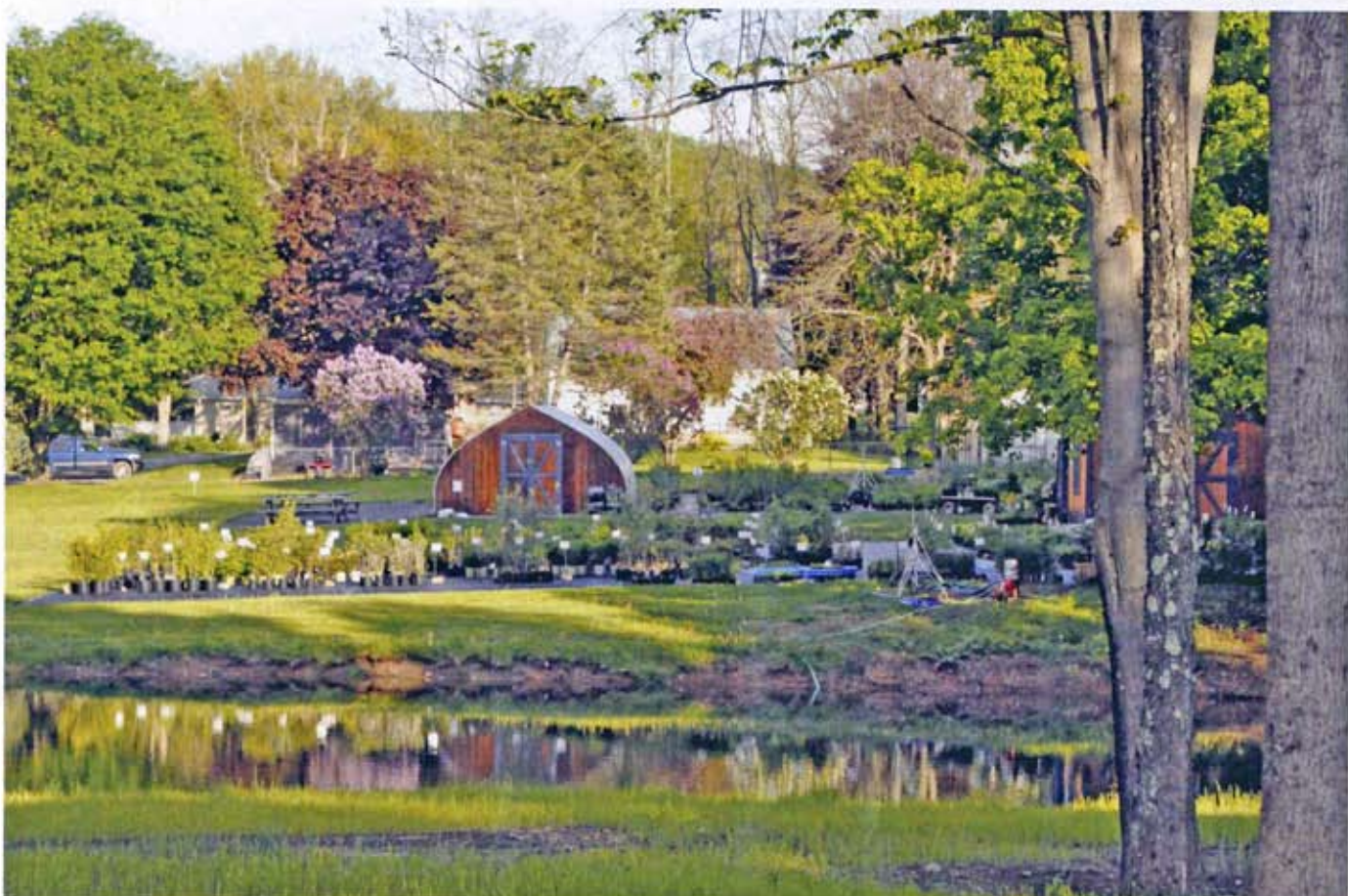
Native plants that provide important food and habitat for insects and birds, while giving the same color and texture as the invasive species; as listed by the New England Wild Flower Society:

- **Sugar Maple** (*Acer rubrum*), replaces Norway maple
- **Bayberry** (*Morella spp.*) replaces autumn olive
- **Climbing Prairie Rose** (*Rosa setigera*) replaces multiflora rose
- **Alternate-leaved dogwood** (*Swida [Cornus] alternifolia*) replaces glossy buckthorn
- **Highbush blueberry** (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) replaces burning bush
- **Inkberry holly** (*Ilex glabra*) replaces blunt-leaved privet
- **Blue flag iris** (*Iris versicolor*) replaces yellow flag iris
- **Serviceberry** (*Amelanchier arborea*) replaces shrub-like honeysuckle
- **Golden Alexander** (*Zizia aurea*) replaces bishop's weed
- **Trumpet creeper** (*Campsis radicans*) replaces oriental bittersweet

For more information on gardening with natives, check out these resources:

www.fiddleheadcreek.com
www.Thosedurnsqurfs.mswin.net
www.wildflower.org
www.newenglandwild.org

Bringing Nature Home, by Douglas W. Tallamy, (Timber Press, 2007)



Plants ready to go home. Fiddlehead Creek opens Memorial Day weekend.



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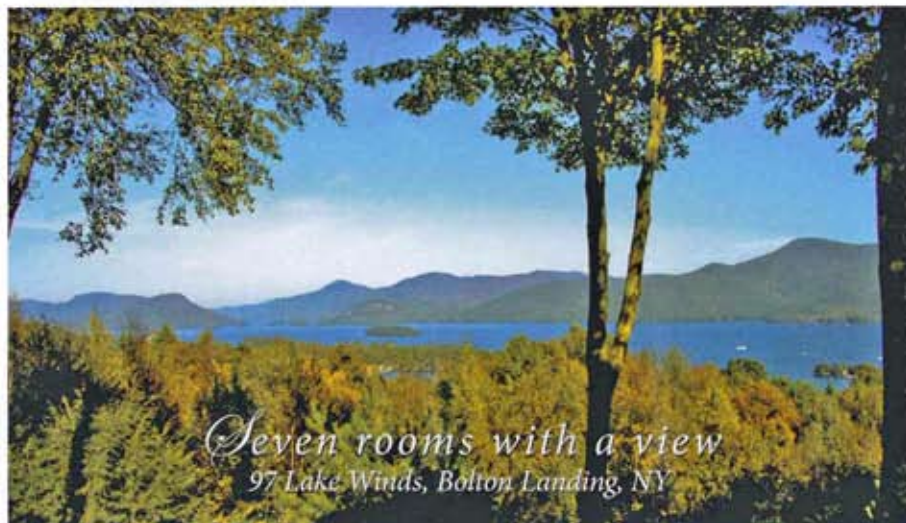
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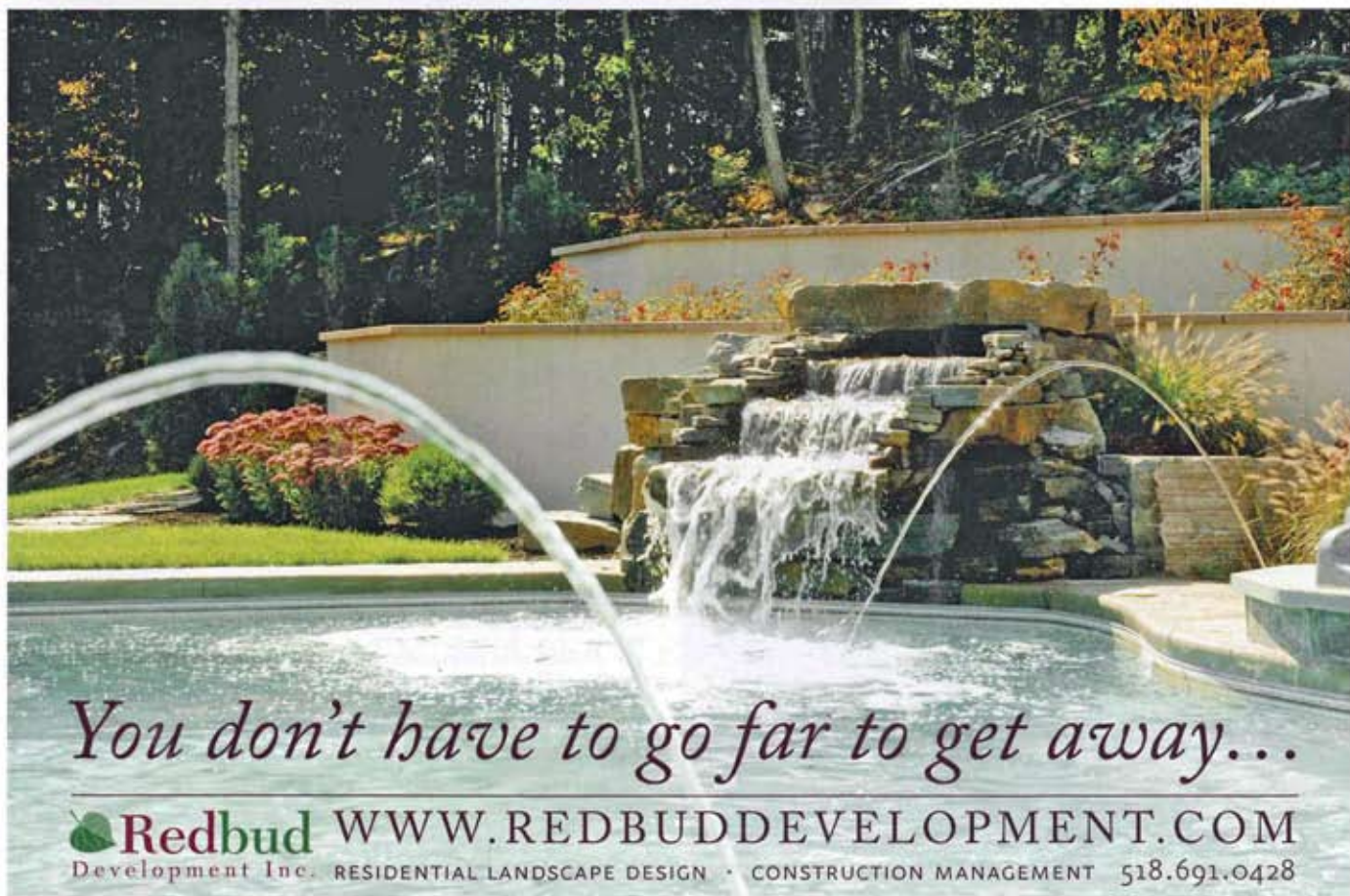
Emily and Chris DeBolt

state Department of Environmental Conservation. In particular: barberry, burning bush, oriental bittersweet and porcelain berry are popular ornamentals that have become almost uncontrollable in many areas.

At Fiddlehead Creek, Emily DeBolt fights the invasives by advocating for natives. With the arrival of the spring planting season, she's preparing to send pots of may-apple, bugbane and witch hazel to nearby backyard gardens, in hopes of changing our gardening habits, one plant at a time. **SL**

Fiddlehead Creek Farm
7381 State Route 40, Hartford
(518) 632-5505
www.fiddleheadcreek.com

Laura Rappaport is a writer, mother and gardener in Saratoga Springs. She formerly worked as editorial writer, columnist and reporter at the Schenectady Daily Gazette and Glens Falls Post-Star.



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