

THE GREEN PAGES

Orefield nursery works to restore region's native ecosystem



By **RUTH HEIL**
Business Journal Columnist

Business owners and homeowners are already adding life to their environment. Spring is when we, or the landscapers we hire, put plants in the ground to beautify our surroundings. Louise Schaefer and Sue Tantsits are working to make this a positive fact for nature. In 2003, they started Edge of the Woods Native Plant Nursery LLC to grow and sell plants that are beneficial to the Lehigh Valley ecosystem.



Photo by Ruth Heil

Signs throughout the Orefield nursery help shoppers select the right plant for the right spot.

Some took over so aggressively they turned ugly. Around the nation, billions of dollars have been spent to control plants such as kudzu, once planted for ornamental properties and now coined "the vine that ate the South."

The story continues today. Deer, for example, eat the natives and leave the

rest, further throwing the balance in favor of the immigrant. Growers everywhere, in response to consumer demand, not only sell non-natives, but also increase sales with greenhouse tricks to force plants to bloom on command. Synthetic chemicals exaggerate natural displays or destroy common diseases. The need for these tricks and additives usually doesn't stop

when the plants come home. Like a child, once spoiled they continue to want more — more water, more fertilizer and more maintenance.

As the nursery's website explains, "We all need to garden as if we lived on the edge of the woods." By choosing natives, we not only act to conserve entire species

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Business basics

EDGE OF THE WOODS
NATIVE PLANT NURSERY LLC

- Principals: Louise Schaefer, Susan Tantsits
- Address: 2415 Route 100, Orefield, PA 18069
- Telephone: (610) 395-2570
- Fax: (610) 395-3546
- Website: www.edgeofthewoodsnursery.com
- Email: info@edgeofthewoodsnursery.com
- Number of employees: 4 full-time; 3 part-time
- Operating since: 2003
- Number of locations: 1

THE GREEN SCENE

The two horticulturists began holding semiannual plant sales to benefit the conservation mission of their previous employer, the Wildlands Conservancy. It didn't take long before two sales a year were not enough to meet the market demand for what's known as native plants, which for us are those that are indigenous to the Mid-Atlantic region.

Located in Orefield, the nursery now sells more than 300 species of native trees, shrubs and perennials and offers design consultation services, speaking engagements, youth and adult programs, access to their library, demonstration gardens and friendly, knowledgeable service.

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Supporting native plants is ecologically important for a number of reasons. As humans plowed and paved over natural areas, they unintentionally destroyed fragile plant communities. These original colonies once provided food for songbirds, insects and other wildlife. They filled Pennsylvania's rolling hills and forests with diversity. They were both beautiful and functional.

After construction, flowerbeds and hedgerows were often replanted with varieties much different from what previously grew there. As they've been doing for hundreds of years, people relocated favorite plants from back home into their new yards. No matter how formal the garden or vigilant the gardener, the plants spread. Life escaped its intended boundary and entered the surrounding ecosystem. These non-natives, unbound by the natural controls found in their original habi-

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NURSERY

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(and the higher species that rely on them), but we also prevent aggressive non-natives from taking over.

Natives are worthy specimens in even the most formal gardens, but it takes more than a supply of Miracle-Gro to establish them. "Natives are specialized and need the right conditions to colonize," said Schaefer, so "education is part of the Edge of the Woods experience."

Posted signs define the requirements and benefits of each plant. Each employee, except for one, has at least a two-year horticultural degree, studying

at places such as Temple University, Delaware Valley College, Lehigh County Community College and Longwood Gardens.

Switching to natives also takes patience and imagination because plants are sold in their natural state instead of in a forced bloom. The nursery library is open to shoppers who want to see photographs of the plants in full bloom. Demonstration gardens let customers see this year's display to plan for next year's garden. The reward comes later, after the plant begins to flourish in its original homeland.

The nursery does not claim to have the cheapest product — bargain hunters and large-scale restoration project leaders are not their target clientele. Instead, they invest in a variety of

quality plants that are locally suited. As Schaefer explained, "Genus and species doesn't tell the whole story." They work hard to obtain seeds with a genetic history directly tied to the area. All this sets Edge of the Woods apart. Tantsits said, "It is our mission to 'Bring Life to the Landscape' and connect people with native plants."

On May 21, the nursery will get two special visitors. Kirk Brown will portray the historical Father of American Botany, John Bartram, to tell his story

and then guide a walk through the nursery. Andrea Wulf, author of "The Founding Gardeners," will deliver a presentation and sign copies of her book. Tickets are available for one session or all three.

Springtime may mean flowers and beauty, but it is especially beautiful at the edge of the woods.

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