

## PLANNED AND UNPLANNED

Susie Quinlan Hill, Frederick County Master Gardener

I planted an unsightly hedge in front of my house twenty years ago. We were having trouble with erosion along an intermittent stream and I thought it a good opportunity to reduce runoff, and plant shrubs that would provide food and habitat for wildlife. Obviously, it was supposed to look good too.

I put a lot of thought into planning-identifying native plants that could tolerate streamside conditions, thinking about size and proportion, and planning spacing. I selected plants with aesthetic value- flowering, colorful berries, fall color, and evergreens for winter interest. I chose only shrubs that gave wildlife nectar and pollen sources, as well as berries for birds. Elderberry, cranberry viburnum, silky and gray dogwood, and inkberry holly passed the test. Only some of what I imagined in my mind's eye came to fruition.

Here is what I planned and got right. The elderberries, cranberry viburnums, and dogwoods had beautiful white flowers that bloom in sync and make a great display en masse. The blossoms bring a profusion of insects that feed on nectar and pollen. The berries are showy, some more than others, but all of them feed hungry birds and provide nesting and perching sites. Quite a few things, however, did not go according to plan.

Although the elderberries grew to a perfect height and width they didn't fill in enough to keep weeds at bay. They are still there but I am actively trying to underplant them with native ferns.

The cranberry viburnums are gorgeous but I didn't get the spacing right so they overgrew the allotted space. I couldn't give them up so I had to move them to a more suitable place in the yard.

The silky and gray dogwoods stabilized the stream bank better than any of the other plants but both shrubs tenaciously overgrew their planned location. I am forever fighting with them, trying to tame the branches so they don't whack people's windshields as they drive by. Had I planted them along the eroding creek bank instead of the small stream in front of my house, they would have been perfect.

Lastly, I planted inkberry hollies. While I love the effect of evergreens in a winter landscape, they grew too slowly to be of use in stabilizing the bank and they now live next to the foundation of my house, where I should have planted them in the first place.

Twenty years later, this hedge continues to evolve. The bank has been stabilized. Oakleaf hydrangeas now live at the top of the bank where it is drier. They have three seasons of interest and large white flowers that I adore. Indian coralberry is spreading. It is the perfect size for the location and offers me a profusion of magenta berries that look good well into the winter. Ferns are spreading, and I am getting ready to introduce some blue flag iris.

Although there were hiccups, the unplanned benefits of watching this project evolve outweigh the difficulties. I didn't foresee how much joy it would bring to see birds perching and nesting in my unsightly hedge. I did not understand how much I would increase the population of beneficial insects, such as praying mantids, because the diversity of plants so greatly enhanced habitat. What makes me happiest of all is that I now see elderberries growing on the far side of my property and at the woodland edge across the street. Perhaps they were there all along and I didn't notice them, but I suspect that at least some of them were carried by birds and planted in exactly the right place at the right time- just where they belong. Sometimes, it is the unplanned surprises that are the best of all.

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