

Rooted in Natives

Designing Living Landscapes for a Resilient Future

Kelly D. Norris

Thesis

New Naturalism focuses on designing gardens as living ecologies rather than static decorations. It's a consilient practice that works to make places resilient, expressive, and generous to all creatures. Resilient plantings are grounded in the realities of their site, rich with species, legible for people to read and love, and dynamic over time.

Place

- Place is physical space given meaning through ecology, memory, use, and care.
- A site is always already shaped by disturbance: geology, hydrology, maintenance, development, and human activity all leave traces.
- Native species should form the backbone wherever possible, supported by adaptive plants that help the planting perform under present and future stresses.
- Gardening changes place. A planting becomes legible and meaningful when people can inhabit it, move through it, and live with it.

Complexity

- Spatially complex landscapes support more creatures. The layered richness of species diversity, their relative abundances, and phenologies form the building blocks of garden-scale habitats.
- The goal is to foster abundance of the most charismatic species, a conviction that supports ecological function with aesthetic force.
- Gardeners act as keystone species. Thoughtful disturbance—cutting back, editing, thinning, or opening space—can regulate competition and sustain diversity.
- Low-resource settings often support greater biodiversity because no single species dominates for long; heterogeneity creates opportunity.

Legibility

- People read landscapes before they understand them ecologically. Naturalistic gardens succeed when they balance aesthetic delight with ecological performance rather than sacrificing one for the other.

- Research and experience suggest that species-rich landscapes are often deeply appealing when they have sufficient structure to serve as proxies for natural systems.
- Legibility can come from repeated plants, clear edges, paths, focal moments, seasonal color, and strong masses set against softer background textures.
- Modular planting blocks, repeatable combinations, and a strong structural framework can make change feel coherent rather than random. It also improves long-term management as those patterns inform horticultural activity.
- The aim is not to copy nature literally, but to translate ecological ideas into forms that fit the site and its audience.

Flow

- A natural garden is dynamic. Change across weeks, seasons, and years is not a flaw—it is the medium.
- Early successional plants and reseederers can provide drama, speed, and surprise while longer-lived species establish more slowly.
- As natural gardens change, the design evolves through stewardship. What do we notice? How do we respond? What judgments underlie our decision-making?
- The broader cultural task is to normalize this kind of vegetation in neighborhoods, institutions, and public places so that dynamic planting becomes a familiar civic language.