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## Not Quite Gone With The Wind

We who garden by the sea are used to wrack and ruin, severed limbs, scorching sunburn, alternating flood and drought, and (here in the Northeast) extremes of temperature. The countless times we have rushed outside to drag pots into shelter, secure loose tie-ups and fencing and turn over the outdoor furniture because of a sudden rise in the wind should be enough to deter us from this easily frustrating pursuit, but they have not. Nor have the hours spent cleaning up broken pottery, picking up branches or searching for the wind chime that has sailed halfway across the yard killed our enthusiasm.

Gardeners everywhere are well versed in the cycles of nature and accordingly accept the rhythms of birth, flowering, maturity and death. Those of us who choose to garden by the sea have the added thrill of the sudden, unexpected element playing its own part in our endeavors. What in other locations may be a calm, orderly and somewhat predictable venture often becomes an unknown and risky adventure when one gardens in the coastal regions. One learns quickly not to waste energy on being disappointed and to respect the forces over which we have no control. Those lessons learned, we are rewarded with the extraordinary beauty, grace and serenity that drew us here in the first place.

The main problem of gardening by the shore is figuring out how to retain the site and its views and still create protection for select plantings farther back from the water. In the 30's and 40's when our property was first landscaped, Japanese Black Pines solved this problem well, as they did in many Long Island gardens. Accepting exquisite shaping by the wind, they created a beautiful sight as they allowed the water to be seen through the twisting, open branches. Alas, not being indigenous, every one of our 25 succumbed to beetle damage in the late 1980's after 50+ years of growth, though not one was lost to a hurricane. A search for alternatives took us to the work of Polly Hill on Martha's Vineyard ([www.pollyhillarboretum.org](http://www.pollyhillarboretum.org)) who was experimenting with native and non-native substitutes for the Black Pine. As a result of her success we have planted other pines (*leucodermis heldreckii*, *parviflora* and *flexilis*), which have adapted to

the wind as well as the Black Pines so far, although we have set them back farther from the water and closer to well established oaks and maples.

Nearer to the water we turned to the tough native shad (*Amelanchier canadensis*), species and (non-native) rugosa roses, ornamental grasses and beach plum (*Prunus maritima*) for the first layer of protection from the wind and salt spray. If you are lucky enough to have waterside property that is untouched by previous development or invasive plants, do leave the natives alone and let them work to your advantage. Such hardy natives as bayberry, sumac, blueberry, chokeberry, viburnum, clethra, juniper and the native Jack Pine (*p. banksiana*) are well suited to our sandy soils and can stand up to the worst of storms. Most have year round interest as well, not just a spring or summer flourish, and provide shelter and food for birds. (Check with local growers for increasing retail availability of these very useful and handsome natives.)

A seaside garden is by nature an informal arrangement of plantings. We come to the sea to relax, unwind and experience the rhythms and spontaneity of the natural world, not the highly controlled human one. Historically, seaside gardens were planted casually with summer bloomers like daylilies, roses, lilies, clematis and hosta. In recent years, however, with a steadily growing deer population, we must grow these plants either behind fences (rarely allowed along the water) or with a regular application of spray repellents. So much for relaxation and spontaneity! So for practical reasons, any indulgences in growing most ornamental plants must be relegated to highly protected areas behind hedges, fences and building walls. There, with amended soil, one can explore any number of enticing delights for there are few plants whose beauty is not enhanced by the addition of fragrant salt air, luminous coastal light and romantic mist and fog.

There are still a multitude of other perennials and annuals of great interest that can be grown for summer variety, without fencing, which will fit in with the relaxed look of a seaside garden and harmonize well with a back drop of native plantings. The most valuable are the hardy herbs and medicinal plants, and the grey leaved plants, which have had centuries of adapting to difficult sites, and are rarely touched by wildlife. Many self sow (celandine, woad, teasel, chamomile, CA poppy, alyssum, lady's mantle) without being invasive and others are long lived, requiring little maintenance (lavender, santolina, nepeta, Siberian and Japanese iris, artemisia,

lamb's ear, thyme, vitex, buddleia alternifolia, perovskia, baptisia, allium, caryopteris, sedum, crocosmia.) Many of these plants continue to add intriguing shapes to the garden long after their blooming time as substantial seedpods are formed to withstand the elements.

Traditional plantings of daffodils with crabapple, cherry and lilac are also well adapted to a shore environment and add welcome spring color. And let's not overlook the ubiquitous hydrangea in the seaside garden – it's ubiquitous for good reason. It is magnificent in its ability to look gloriously casual, lush and tidy at the same time and seems to reflect best how we feel at the peak of summer relaxation-refreshed, exuberant and ageless. Although in recent years deer have developed a taste for the leaves of hydrangea macrophylla, it's worth trying to grow the tardiva and quercifolia (oak-leaf) hydrangeas without fencing. They, too, are lovely, strong and long lasting bloomers.

For evergreen structure and year round interest in the garden, away from the front lines near the shore, there are many varieties of hollies (including favorite natives *ilex opaca*, *glabra* and *verticillata*) to choose from these days as well as boxwood, *chamaecyparis*, low growing spruce, and cotoneaster. Once you have created a microclimate out of the wind and within the protection of tougher plantings one can even explore the wonders of heaths and heathers, which thrive in a sheltered, sunny location here. That word, microclimate, is the key to successful gardening by the sea. By growing a variety of trees and shrubs, that can together shelter and screen the worst effects of wind and salt spray, you can experiment with many other plants. Our property and that of adjoining neighbors have benefited from the shelter of mature plantings of non-native oaks, silver maples, *cryptomeria* and ginkgo which have formed a unique small forest, beneath which we are able to grow a great variety of under story trees, shrubs and perennials. They must have been planted as an experiment when set out as small saplings decades ago in moorland, but it was an experiment that has lasted for 75 years and is ongoing. So, another lesson learned here has been that it's okay to take risks and experiment, despite the odds of success - just be prepared to expect and accept the unexpected!

When I first started gardening on the shore of Lake Montauk 30 years ago, my mother (who gardened on the coast of Maine) and my

aunt (on Cape Cod) both said determinedly to read Daniel Foley's Gardening by the Sea. First published in 1965 with mostly black & white photographs, it may seem a bit dated compared to more colorful books of today, but it remains an important source of information on sites, culture, types of plants to use and problems likely to be encountered. (You can still find copies at Amazon.com or borrow it from the Horticultural Alliance library in Bridgehampton.) Local governmental regulations on shoreline protection were just emerging in the mid-1960's and we were not yet conscious of the damage done by invasive plants, so be aware that this book is out of date in that regard.

Other sources of information and inspiration for local plant choices include Karen Blumer's Long Island Native Plants for Landscaping: A Source Book, Growing Wild Publications; The Salty Thumb, published by the Montauk Village Assn. in 1967; local author Theodore James's Seaside Gardening, Harry Abrams, 1995; and the recently published Seascape Gardening by local garden writer Anne Halpin.

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