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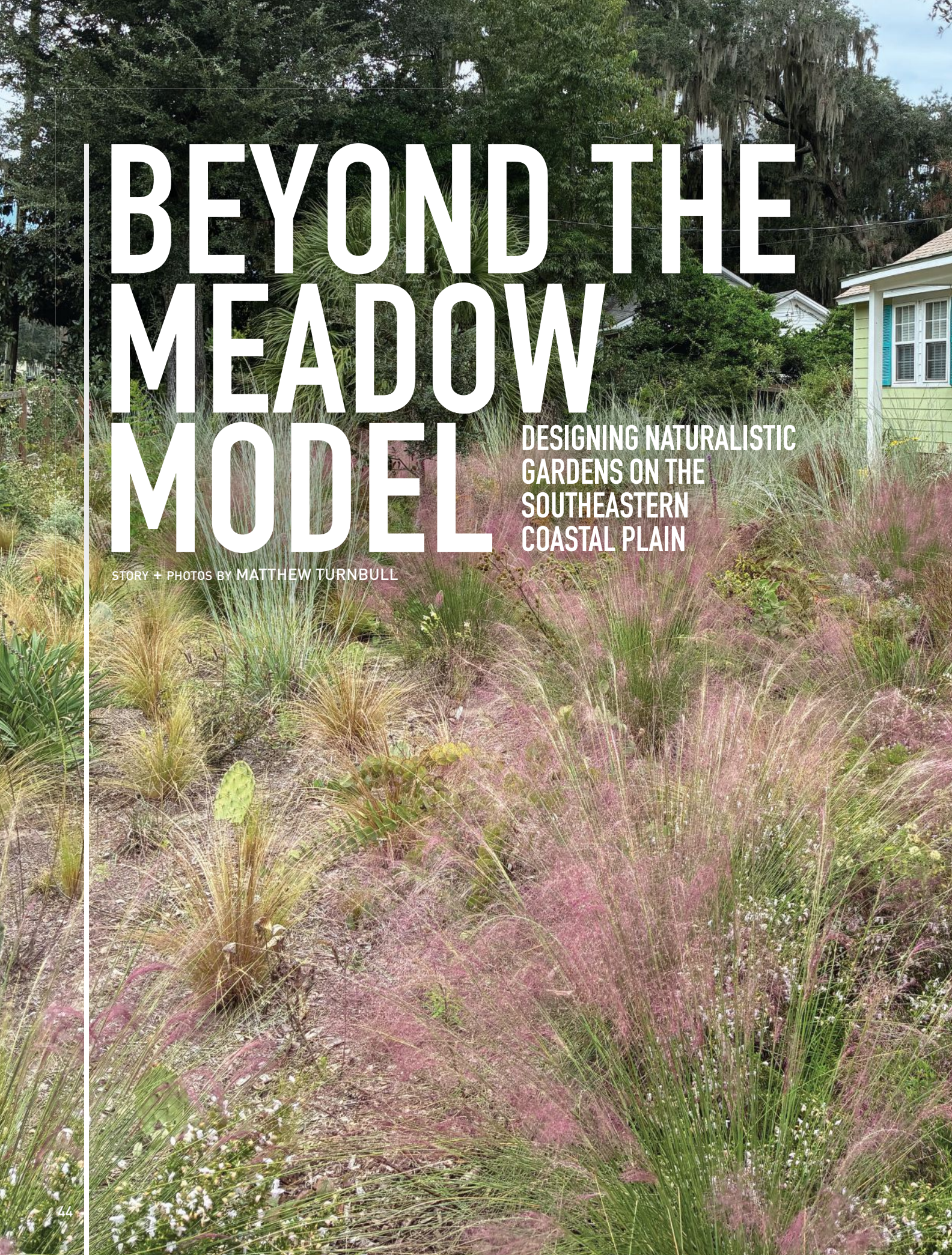

BEYOND THE MEADOW MODEL

DESIGNING NATURALISTIC GARDENS ON THE SOUTHEASTERN COASTAL PLAIN

STORY + PHOTOS BY MATTHEW TURNBULL

Strategic combinations of grasses, perennials, palms, and shrubs create a cohesive four-season garden that is both aesthetically pleasing and benefits local wildlife.

THE QUESTION WAS NOT WHETHER A NATURALISTIC GARDEN COULD WORK HERE. THE QUESTION WAS HOW TO DESIGN ONE THAT EMBRACED THE REALITIES OF THIS PLACE.

OLD PLANTS, NEW WAYS. NEW PLANTS, OLD WAYS.

The southeastern United States, and especially the coastal plain, has long been absent from the dominant narrative of naturalistic garden design. While prairie-inspired plantings of the American heartland have shaped the aesthetic conversation, the Southeast remains underrepresented in the oeuvre of native perennial landscapes. Yet here, in this land of contradiction, where manicured golf courses, traditional formal hedges, and exotic Asian plant-inspired gardens collide against an increasing tide of ecological focus and land conservation, a different kind of opportunity exists.

It was in this climate that I began brainstorming a naturalistic garden in my underutilized front yard in the late months of 2022 and early 2023 in Beaufort, South Carolina, on the east coast between Charleston and Savannah. With warmer temperatures, a longer growing season, and a charismatic diversity of plant possibilities, the coastal plain offers an expansive palette. Maritime forests, sandhills, pine savannas, and grasslands exist not as distant ecosystems, but as nearby references—living templates to observe and reinterpret.

The question was not whether a naturalistic garden could work here. The question was how to design one that embraced the realities of this place—heat, humidity, fluctuating winters, assertive turfgrass—while expanding the style beyond the familiar meadow model. In a region where winter is brief and the growing season stretches long, time itself becomes a design material. What emerges is not a single crescendo of bloom, but a series of chapters, shifting textures, rotating color, structural grasses rising and fading, evergreen forms anchoring the whole. A constant mantra was to plant what thrives.

READING THE COASTAL PLAIN

Across the Southeast, mountain ecoregions differ dramatically from the coastal plain. The Piedmont runs between them and has historically documented warm-season grassland prairies observed by 16th- and 17th-century explorers like Mark Catesby and John Bartram. Even within the coastal plain, diversity abounds. Ecosystems such as the maritime forest, pine savannas, longleaf pine–carnivorous plant savannas, sandhills, bottomland hardwood forests, and the beachy maritime strand each offer different ecological cues.

Plant selection here has less to do with state lines or geographical proximity and more to do with ecoregions defined by land use history, soil, hydrology, and, further inland, the bedrock. Indicator plants reveal what lies beneath the surface. As the saying goes, "20 miles away geographically can equal 1,000 miles ecologically."

Most visitors would call this landscape a native garden. Yet near natives play a co-starring role. These plants fall outside the strict local palette but share climate tolerance, soil preference, and hardiness traits. For example, experimenting with a Florida pine savanna *Silphium*, *Leucophyllum frutescens* (Texas sage), *Tecoma stans* (esperanza), assorted salvias, and agaves expands design flexibility while still responding to the climate.

In heavily altered residential landscapes—where swamps have been drained for development, asphalt radiates heat, trees have been cleared after hurricanes or for powerline openings, and soils get heavily compacted by construction—definitions of what is native blur. In my neighborhood, live oaks, laurel oaks, and pines once dominated. Over the years, and as a result of several hurricanes, many trees were removed. The resulting full sun and sandy soil now resemble conditions closer to open pine savannas or even parts of West Texas—landscapes that now inform some of the plants I am experimenting with.

Midsummer brings peak diversity, riotous bloom, and a focus on texture. As the sun moves, shifting light creates ever-changing vignettes across the garden.

Most plants were grown from seed in a backyard nursery. The design evolved over several months, with distinct zones unified by drift plantings. Pathways frame the naturalistic garden.

PREPARING THE GROUND

The foundation of this garden rests on colorful forbs, spiky upright rosettes, dwarf scrubland shrubs, and a diverse palette of warm-season grasses. Rather than limiting the planting palette to strictly hyperlocal natives—those growing geographically closest to my garden—incorporating near natives from neighboring ecoregions expands tonal and structural possibilities. Salvias, yuccas, opuntias, agaves, and palms contribute architectural weight while still responding to the climate.

Site analysis, thorough site preparation, future maintenance considerations, and plant selection are the practical keys to unlocking any successful landscape. One formidable opponent is existing warm-season rhizomatous turfgrass—Bermudagrass, centipede grass, St. Augustine grass, and, in this case, Bahia grass. Left unchecked, they will happily reclaim any planting bed. Patience during preparation is essential to long-term success.

Yet, the same climate that fuels turfgrass also provides the garden's greatest advantage—time. An ephemeral winter gives way to extended seasons of spring, summer, and fall. Compared to colder regions, the growing calendar grows wide. The result is a timeline with microseasons with several distinct phases of interest, like chapters in a book.

DESIGNING FOR A LONG SEASON

This garden has become a testing ground for resilience. Winter temperatures may fluctuate dramatically. Several consecutive days of 70-degree highs can be followed immediately by several days with lows in the high teens and low 20s. These swings demand plants that tolerate both interrupted dormancy and sudden cold stress.

The region's reputation for "12 seasons of weeds" often discourage gardeners before they begin. But proper site preparation can dramatically reduce the weed pressure, allowing your chosen plants to thrive.

Balancing plant competitiveness is another useful strategy. By observing native plants in nearby landscapes, you can predict their vigor. If you have acres, consider using more aggressive native perennials. In a 3,400-square-foot garden like this one, restraint matters. One well-intended aggressive experiment can destabilize the entire planting. I have removed a few such overachievers, banished to the backyard.

Density is another key. In both theory and practice, planting with a spacing of 12 to 15 inches between plants allows them to knit together, providing mutual protection and functioning as a community or system rather than as isolated individuals separated by mulch.

BUILDING PLANT COMMUNITIES

Purposeful combinations anchor the design. One effective trio pairs *Nassella tenuissima* (Mexican feathergrass), *Asclepias tuberosa* (butterflyweed), and *Salvia azurea* (blue sage). Each occupies its niche—fine-textured movement, bold seasonal bloom, and vertical blue spikes—rotating visual interest through color, height, foliage texture, blooms, and even fragrance.

Another combination layers the silvery *Andropogon capillipes* (chalky bluestem), with the rosemary lookalike *Clinopodium georgianum* × *ashei* 'Desi Arnaz,' and the grounded, architectural presence of *Serenoa repens* 'Cinera' (silver saw palm). The shimmering grasses add verticality and color, the minty foliage softens, and the palms anchor the composition.

As with all gardens, the canopy and understory layers help define and ground the garden in the landscape. Along the perimeter, mostly native evergreens, *Sabal palmetto* (cabbage palmetto), *Lyonia lucida* (fetterbush), *Gordonia lasianthus* (loblolly bay), *Clethra tomentosa* 'Cottondale' (summersweet), and native azaleas define the boundaries and create structure and enclosure.

WHEREVER YOU LIVE, THE PRINCIPLES REMAIN CONSTANT: KNOW YOUR GROWING ENVIRONMENT, OBSERVE LOCAL ECOSYSTEMS, EXPERIMENT WITH PLANT POSSIBILITIES, PLANT WHAT THRIVES, & ENJOY THE PROCESS.

Winter interest emerges during brief frosts, when icy layers highlight the textures of yuccas, palms, and cacti.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF NATURALISTIC GARDEN

The coastal plain also offers a wealth of hyperlocal plants with strong landscape potential. Examples include *Andropogon capillipes*, the dramatic and ghostly five-foot chalky bluestem; *Muhlenbergia sericea*, the autumnal pink cloud known widely as pink muhly grass and locally as sweetgrass; *Baptisia perfoliata* (catbells), prized for its eucalyptus-like foliage; *Vaccinium darrowii* (Darrow's blueberry); *Cyrilla racemiflora* 'Tom Patrick'; *Pinckneya pubens* (Georgia fever tree); *Ampelaster carolinianus* (climbing aster); and *Eryngium ravenelii* (Ravenel's swamp rattlesnake master).

Many of these plants had to be found, seed collected, and grown by my wife Kate and me in a makeshift backyard nursery. Veteran plant people will agree that to grow a plant is to know a plant. Using little more than pallets, black fabric pots, and inconsistent watering, we propagated and trialed plants under real coastal conditions. Propagation became another testing ground—an early filter for resilience before plants ever reached the garden.

The sandhills-native *Baptisia perfoliata* exemplifies the aesthetic power of hyperlocal plants not widely available in the trade. Several selections of *Amsonia ciliata* and *A. rigida* offer similar potential. These plants add local flair and a sense of place that reflect the distinctiveness of this part of the Southeast—often called the Low Country for its flat topography and network of tidal brackish rivers.

Wherever you live, the principles remain constant: know your growing environment, observe local ecosystems, experiment with plant possibilities, plant what thrives, and enjoy the process.

The coastal plain may not resemble the meadow landscapes that shaped the naturalistic movement, but that difference is precisely its strength. With long growing seasons, resilient native plants, and a willingness to experiment across ecoregions, the Southeast offers an opportunity to push the style into new territory—one rooted not in imitation, but in place. //

Perennial grasses and abundant seedheads sway on hazy, radiant late-autumn days—my favorite time in the garden.

HYPERLOCAL VS. NEAR NATIVE: CHOOSING PLANTS WISELY

Both hyperlocal natives and near-native species can strengthen naturalistic plantings. Understanding when to use each allows designers to balance ecological authenticity with practical resilience.

Choose hyperlocal natives when:

- Soil conditions closely resemble nearby natural ecosystems
- You are restoring a site with relatively intact hydrology
- You want strong regional identity and ecological authenticity
- You want to support specialist pollinators and host plants

Consider near natives when:

- Development has altered drainage, soil, structure, or sun exposure
- Canopy loss has shifted microclimates
- Soils are heavily compacted or disturbed
- You need plants adapted to extreme heat, sand, or reflected urban heat
- You want to extend bloom sequences beyond local seasonal patterns

NOTE: For more information on hyperlocal plants for the coastal plain and other eco-regions, see *www.epa.gov/eco-research/ecoregions-north-america*.