

Does your yard have a ‘hellstrip’? Native plants could help.

By Tovah Martin

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If you’ve never had to apply the word “hellstrip” to a section of your yard, consider yourself fortunate. The term was coined for land next to the road where nothing will grow, except perhaps undesirables such as crabgrass and poison ivy. The soil typically has the consistency of cement, a fertility level around zero and it’s exposed to all the runoff of the nasty stuff winter road crews toss on the street.

You might say why bother, but dedicated gardeners embrace this sort of challenge. And even if you don’t have a hellstrip, the concept has legs, with lessons that can be applied to any location where the land is poor and plantings often fail. Whether it’s an embankment, a gully, the thin soil covering a ledge or another problem spot, the solutions used by road warriors can help.

If you’re dealing with an actual hellstrip, your options will depend on the regulations in your municipality. Technically, the land right along the road belongs to either the town or state, which may have restrictions on usage for safety issues, protecting sightlines and preserving access for utilities. You will need to obtain permission before fiddling with roadside land and take care not to obstruct visibility or create a potentially dangerous situation.

And even with permission, gardening on turf that is regulated by the city, town or state can present unique challenges. Emily Baisden, the seed program manager for the Wild Seed Project in Portland, Maine, received the city’s okay to plant her hellstrip, but she says the local mowing crew did not get the message. The result was scalped plantings.

She also learned the hard way not to sow seeds where storm water runoff presents an issue. Perennial native seeds usually require a freezing period before germination, so they often wash away during the winter weeks spent exposed beside the road. Baisden now uses plugs (small plants) or pint pots instead of seeds. Her roadside rule is to select plants that typically remain below two feet in height to keep sightlines clear. It helps that the traumatic conditions typical of a hellstrip often keep plants compact.

Another possible solution for the erosion issue, according to Mark Richardson, director of horticulture at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill in Boyleston, Mass., is to hydroseed. He did this for islands in the botanic garden's heavily sloping parking lot, mixing wildflower perennial and grass seeds with paper mulch to create a slush. Following application, an erosion control mat keeps the seeds in place. The mixes are customized for the specific challenges of each planting island. For wet spots, for example, he uses swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), soft rush (*Juncus effusus*), Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*) and New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*).

Although hydroseeding itself might be beyond the average homeowner's scope, the recipe, which includes quick germinators such as partridge pea (*Chamaecrista fasciculata*) to grab and hold the soil, can be adapted for home use in challenging situations that are not beside the road.

Another lesson from Richardson's parking lot plantings that can help the home hellstrip gardener: Don't fertilize the soil. Many native plants are adapted to sinking their roots into gritty, lean soil. They prefer tough love. He recycled poor soil from construction on-site to create a planting base. In addition to seeded sections, he also uses plugs. His successes for the project include plugs of potted golden groundsel (*Packera obovata*), threadleaf bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia reverchonii*), New York aster (*Symphotrichum novi-belgii*) and blazing star (*Liatris spicata*). On the other hand, Russian sage (*Salvia yangii*) couldn't stand the stress.

On or off the road, the factor that unifies most hellstrip situations is a lack of water. Kathy Sykes, a master gardener and master naturalist dedicated to creating a corridor for pollinators in D.C., spends countless hours delivering water to the 1.3 miles of "tree boxes" along Connecticut Avenue that she received permission to plant primarily with native perennials and annuals.

Sykes starts by planting after a rain, positioning the plants densely so their leaves overlap to shield the soil from baking, drying sun. She then delivers a generous drink once a week (or occasionally every third day in a drought), spending about 45-60 minutes watering each box to let the moisture soak in deeply. Because she has selected drought-tolerant perennials, less water is needed in subsequent years, once they are established and have deep roots.

Native plants are an excellent solution for inhospitable conditions. My personal battle with a hellstrip changed drastically the day I inserted coneflowers (*Echinacea cvs*) in the pitiful soil not far from the road. Echinacea categorically failed in my ultra-fertile perennial beds; tucking it near the road was a last resort. Turns out, it loved the starved, gritty soil.

Many native plants prefer the lean and mean treatment that a hellstrip provides, Baisden says. "One of the great things about native plants is they don't require soil amendments," she says.

Baisden says perennials such as yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), wild indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*), rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) and fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) are survivors even in parching sun. For shadier sites, wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*) and Canada anemone (*Anemone canadensis*) are favorite fillers.

Farther back from the road, lowbush blueberries tolerate the grit and drought/deluge from the pavement. Where sight lines are not an issue, little bluestem, shrubby Saint John's wort (*Hypericum prolificum*), beach plum (*Prunus maritima*), and bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla lonicera*) are workhorses. And the contained space of hellstrips helps curb the expansion of notorious spreaders such as anemone and bee balm.

Everyone who wrestles a hellstrip into a bountiful and beautiful scene has earned boasting rights. Whether it's a roadside expanse, a steep slope, a plot alongside your driveway, or another site plagued by cruel conditions, greening a former throwaway space is a feel-good opportunity. Best of all, neighbors notice. And sometimes they even follow the example.

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