



Peter shows off the flowers of the crape myrtle at his gardens on 18th Avenue in Wall. (Photo by Tom Spader)

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WALL — When Peter James and his wife, Lynn, bought their vacation home in Wall, the house sat on 1.25 acres of grass.

James, a self-employed consultant from England, said he did not have any knowledge of plants or gardening when he first bought the house in the late 1990s. "The guy was a lawn nut," James said. "There was nothing but a lot

of grass." But James said he changed that drastically over the past decade. The lawn is now home to 75 varieties of maples, 12 different species of willows and some of the rarest plants in North America.

"I'm really a collector of plants," he said. "My artistic talents are a number approaching zero."

Of his collection of maples, he said his favorite is the coral stripe maple, which currently has a yellow-white trunk. "You wouldn't even look twice at it now," he said. "Come October the trunk is a shocking bright pink with white stripes."

In 2006, he graduated from Rutgers' master gardener program, which is where he said he learned the majority of what he knows about horticulture. "They teach you about turf care, pest management, plant diseases, everything down to telling the difference between different kinds of pests," he said. The program, which is run by the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, offers 60 hours of in-depth training in horticulture from Rutgers University faculty and staff in exchange for 60 hours of volunteer work, according to Richard Obal, Monmouth County agricultural agent for the co-op. "As a collector, he's very studious," Obal said of James. "He's just very, very knowledgeable about the plant species that he's interested in."

James, 52, volunteers with the program's help line, where people can call in with questions about their gardens, particular plants, problems, or anything that volunteer master gardeners might be able to help with. The telephone number for the help line is (732) 303-7614.

It's been through trial and error that James has learned the most about his own garden, he said. Because he is interested in rare plants, he browses catalogs that list 6,000 to 7,000 different plants, without pictures or common names accompanying them. His favorite local nursery is Rare Find Nursery in Jackson.

"At most nurseries, you ask someone a question and they go find someone else who finds their manager to answer the question and you just don't get that warm fuzzy feeling that you can trust the answer you're given," James said. "It's not like that at Rare Find. Most of the people working there have studied horticulture in-depth."

When James goes into a nursery or decides to pick out new plants from a catalog, he said he is concerned with two things: the length of the bloom time and the zone in which the plant flourishes.

James said he looks for plants that are hardy at least through zone 7, though he occasionally tries zone 8 plants, which must be carefully sheltered from the wind. Zones are dictated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Plant Hardiness Zone Map.

As for bloom time, James has several plants on his property that bloom several times a year, some during the winter. "There's not a day in the year you can come to this lot and not see something in bloom," he said. One of his plants, a March Until Frost magnolia, blooms several times a year. "If you've got limited space, it pays (for) you to plant one of these magnolias rather than one that blooms only once," he said.

That's where research comes in, he said. To really make your garden thrive, gardeners should learn more about their environment and what plants will flourish there, James said. "Most people don't know what they're doing when they walk into a nursery," he said. "That was me for a long, long time, so I'm not knocking anyone."

