Help! My Stream Ate My Yard!

It is a situation that is not uncommon in Upper Southampton Township.

A family buys a house with a stream in the backyard. How tranquil! How nice!

With development and less porous surfaces and more and longer lasting rain and snow storms, our streams have more water and many of our stream channels are not prepared to handle that.

Bank erosion occurs as a result, and that often means our yards are disappearing downstream.

There are low-tech solutions that are environmentally sustainable. For example, planting along streams is a natural and easy solution.

Here are some things you can try:

1. Establish a mow-free zone (as wide as you feel comfortable establishing and perpetuating). Believe it or not, roots of grasses and herbaceous plants do hold soil in place, and the larger the plant- the larger its root system will be.
2. Another strategy is to employ live staking. Live staking is a practice wherein finger-sized diameter twigs of streambank and bottomland plants (a few feet long) are inserted into the streambank and allowed to root and grow. Again, the goal is to grow roots to hold soil in place. Typical species used for these stakes are red twig or silky dogwood, wild willows, alder, and even elderberry. You may have to look for these (and ask permission to harvest) or try to find them online. The best time to implement live staking is very early spring when buds have just begun to swell. While some of these plants may require buying a bush or two to get started, once the twigs are rooted and growing, new twigs can be harvested from them the following spring.
3. Add native trees and shrubs and wildflowers and native grasses to the areas along your stream. Many native plants are now available at local nurseries or sources can be found on-line.

A word of caution: DO NOT plant them so close to the bank that during the next storm they belong to your neighbor downstream. Give them some room.

Congratulations!

When you have accomplished these few helpful tasks, you will have created a riparian buffer and with that comes a healthier, more stable stream with the added benefit of a more diverse population of birds and butterflies and other beautiful wild things!

Find more helpful information online and more specifically check with the Penn State Agriculture Extension Agency.

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