
Beyond Your Yard

The native habitat you build in your yard will be worth more to wildlife if your neighbors also plant natives on their properties and if the community associations, local schools, churches, and town itself also work to reduce lawns and plant more natives. This community-wide effort will provide good flyways and corridors where wildlife can find refuge, birds can find shelter and nesting sites, and butterflies can find nectar and larval food sources. In addition, as more nearby properties eradicate invasives, fewer will be available to be carried back onto your property and neighboring wildlands. As far as controlling invasives goes, everyone's maintenance will become a little easier. There are various ways to participate in this process and to urge others to hop on the native habitat bandwagon.

It's a good idea to further your native plant education right at the beginning of a naturalizing project by joining your local native plant society chapter. You will find many smart people who care for the environment. Attend meetings, go on field trips, and participate in plant sales, workshops, and workdays. Volunteer to assist in the chapter booth at various outreach events. It's so educational to talk to attendees about native plants, but don't oversell—because as you now know, planting native plants does not mean a maintenance-free landscape. In Florida, join the Florida Native Plant Society (www.FNPS.org). To look for other native plant organizations see www.for-wild.org/hot-links.htm.

For a more formal and structured education in local ecosystems, sign up for local master naturalist courses—no prior scientific training

is needed. Classes cover core topics in ecology as a whole complex entity—geology, hydrology, weather, plants (native, exotic, and invasive), and wildlife including birds, mammals, butterflies, and other bugs. These courses focus specifically on ecosystems in your region and not on just general talking points about a subject—you learn exactly what you need to know to be a successful manager of a native landscape. The other important benefit is meeting the local experts who teach the courses so you will be more connected to local environmental issues and ongoing local initiatives. In Florida, the core topics are wetlands ecosystems, coastal ecosystems, and upland ecosystems—each core topic is covered by a 40-hour curriculum. Shorter courses cover additional, more specific topics that will also further your knowledge.

Once you have taken the core classes, you are expected to volunteer a certain number of hours as a master naturalist in state or local parks, schools, or other areas with natural habitats. As a master naturalist



Doug Tallamy has proved that unpoisoned native plants in your yard provide much needed habitat services for wildlife. If the whole neighborhood is full of natives, the difference is huge. How can this bird not stop for a rest and a snack?

you can choose volunteer opportunities that are the best fit for your skills and lifestyle. With local budget cuts in place these days, your volunteer hours can make a huge difference for a small park, environmental center, or local school system. Schools and young people are a major leverage point when educating about using native plants. You'll reach more people and have a higher likelihood of impacting neighborhoods if the kids initiate family projects. In Florida see www.masternaturalist.ifas.ufl.edu/. Other states' programs are similar—for a listing, see the website of the Alliance of Natural Resource Outreach and Service Programs (www.anrosp.org). All in all, master naturalists are a force for nature.

Close to Home

Many communities own or maintain open lands for the use and enjoyment of residents. If this is the case for your own community, maybe some of the areas could be managed more sustainably by establishing native ecosystems around the fringes in the lesser-used areas. You could work from the inside by joining the community board of governors to have more influence over land management decisions and maybe help ease restrictive regulations about lawns. On a smaller scale, you could help community youth groups or schools build and maintain butterfly gardens. And who wouldn't want more butterflies? Maybe your community would qualify for a wildflower grant of some type to help fund the effort. In Florida, a good place to start looking for small grants is the Florida Wildflower Foundation (flawildflowers.org).

Perhaps a local retention pond needs attention. Find out whether it could be turned into a neighborhood project to clean up and plant appropriate natives at its edges. See chapter 10 for specific pond guidelines.

If there are roadways with extra-wide shoulders in your town or county, talk to the public works department to initiate no-mow areas where they could plant wildflowers instead of grass and mow only once a year. Local municipal districts also have lands around buildings such as town halls, courthouses, and libraries that probably have high-maintenance lawns that could be reduced by installing native butterfly

The rule of “Ps”

When talking with politicians, people who work for government agencies, or HOA officers, follow the Rule of “Ps”:

Be Prepared

Have your materials and handouts ready ahead of time. Your face-time may be severely limited, so this preparation can make the difference between making your point or not.

Be Polite and Respectful

Even if you disagree with a policy or a municipal worker thinks you’re wasting time. Getting angry or antagonistic means that you may not be welcomed back in the future.

Deliver Praise

Compliment the workers or group for policies, laws, or actions that are steps in the right direction—no matter how small.

Be Punctual

If you’ve set up a time to meet someone, make it easy by meeting at his or her office (or other designated place) and be early for the meeting. Things can be a whirlwind of activity in government or agency offices, so don’t be a hindrance to their operations.

Be Persistent

If your contact initially rejects your ideas but suggests a date when you can come back, don’t let it slide; call back and be there. Or try talking to a different person with a slightly different responsibility. Or organize a grass roots group so you are harder to ignore.

Be Patient

Changing government policies can be a cumbersome process, so it may be a long time before anything happens even if your ideas are accepted.

This is an investment in not only your yard, but also everyone else’s, and the whole community’s ecosystems.

gardens and rain gardens. These could save taxpayer money because of less frequent mowing and they would also enhance the community and its habitats. Keep in mind that the initial building and establishment of native areas is only the start and they will need ongoing care, so plan for that with a “Friends of whatever township” group to coordinate the care, whether performed by public works department personnel or volunteers such as a youth group, garden club, master gardeners, or master naturalists.

Another public works type of project is to reduce the flow of stormwater into local waterways by cutting openings in curbs and installing large rain gardens to soak up the water. This effort would be a community-wide effort, with initial infrastructure changes being handled by the municipality, but a group of volunteers could plant natives appropriate for rain gardens. One community member who would want to be part of a stormwater initiative is the local riverkeeper or baykeeper, because containing stormwater is a big part of reducing water pollution. Also, these water-collecting swales make wonderful habitat that



CURBSIDE RAIN GARDEN

Public and private land managers can work together to reduce the flow of water into our precious waterways. Curbside rain gardens can accomplish this beautifully.

enhances the whole community. Find your local waterkeeper on this website: www.waterkeeper.org.

Churches and synagogues often have wide expanses of lawn that cost money to mow. Some of the lawn may be used for parking or events, but much of it is probably never used. You could present a plan to the congregation about becoming better stewards of their land and then help them get started on building butterfly gardens or groves of trees. Maybe they could build a meditation garden or natural cathedral.

Your Own Story

The story of how you are transforming your own landscape can be used as an example for others to follow. You don't need to be an expert with advanced degrees in ecology to tell your story—actually, your experience as an “average person” might resonate with more people. Telling your story works best if you document the process from the beginning with photos, sketches, and notes. At the outset, start a garden log, and take notes on what works well and what you would do differently. Sharing your experiences in how “things” went wrong is often more educational and memorable than sugarcoating everything and showing only the good parts.

To create the most compelling story, take plenty of “before,” “during,” and “after” photos of the process of going natural. Maybe you could perform a citizen science experiment with repeated counts of birds or butterflies, or both, over several days and during specific times during the day before you start planting natives and then again after you stop using pesticides and plant natives. One way to organize the science is to participate in the Great Sunflower Project, where you plant sunflowers and count the pollinators during certain times of the day. The group specifies how to do this and then collects pollinator data from citizen scientists across the country. Participating in this formalized study allows you to document and enumerate the real effects of building habitat on your property. If possible start your participation before beginning your native plantings to provide the best analysis of what happens after you plant a yard with natives (www.greatsunflower.org). Your citizen science experiment will make a compelling story.