

IN THE GARDEN

Native Landscapes Can Be Hard to Plant. But Help Is Here.

The nonprofit group Wild Ones offers a free library of designs, with plants specific to your area — and you don't have to be a member to use it.

By Margaret Roach

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Turning your front yard into something other than a manicured greensward sounds like a bold new idea, even today. Imagine how it felt, in 1992, to see former lawns in Wisconsin that were already many years into their transition to prairie-like spaces, with no turf grass in sight.

Positively radical.

I was collaborating on a book called “The Natural Habitat Garden” with Ken Druse, a writer and photographer, traveling across the country to see the vanguard of the native-plant movement. We spent a day north of Milwaukee with Lorrie Otto, an early leader in what became a nationwide push to ban the pesticide DDT and a force in the formative years of Wild Ones, a membership organization promoting native landscapes. Ms. Otto sent us to visit other members' home landscapes that were wild-ish, like hers — gardens unlike any we had ever seen.



Flowering native perennials and grasses and a serviceberry shrub (*Amelanchier*) have replaced some of the lawn at the home of Deborah Rees, a Wild Ones member in Elgin, Ill. Deborah Rees

Education is at the heart of the nonprofit organization's mission, and Ms. Otto, who died in 2010, developed some of its earliest programming. The group turned 45 in July; it also just hit 11,000 members, up from fewer than 4,000 before the pandemic.

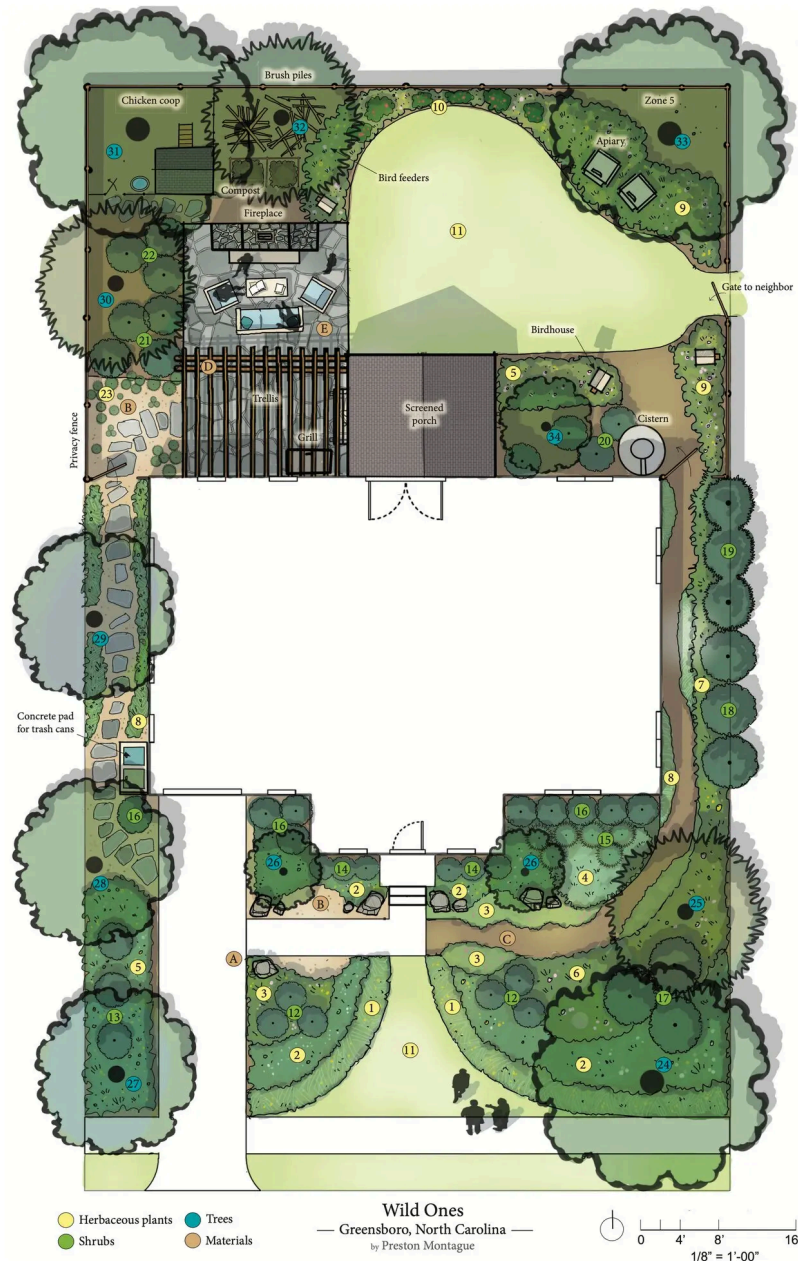
Those members belong to 125 chapters in 36 states (and both of those numbers have doubled since 2020). Members participate in garden tours and workshops, seed collection and exchanges, and plant sales. They also take on community projects, restoring degraded landscapes including vacant lots, street medians, schoolyards and business-park lawns.

All of this falls within the group's mission: to "promote native landscapes through education, advocacy and collaborative action."

But one of the most popular programs involves maintaining a library of free, downloadable garden designs for specific regions — available to nonmembers, as well. The designs debuted in 2021 in a moment of rapid growth, said Sally Wencel, a member of the Tennessee Valley chapter and a past president of the national organization who was instrumental in developing the program. It was meant to answer the question that members were frequently asking: What's the best way to use native plants?

"We were preaching to the choir," Ms. Wencel said, referring to the group's native-focused member base. "And they said, 'Yeah, this is great, but help us with how to use them in the landscape.' The designs do that."

The validation: As of January, 84,000 downloads of those designs had been recorded.



One of Wild Ones's most popular programs is a library of free, downloadable landscape designs, each focused on native plants in a particular ecoregion. (This one is by Preston Montague, a landscape architect in North Carolina.) Preston Montague for Wild Ones

Getting Started With Ecological Design

The library currently has 20 designs for various locations, including Tallahassee, Fla.; Tucson, Ariz.; and Boston. (And, yes, Milwaukee.) Five more are coming soon, each created by a professional landscape designer with expertise in the

specific ecoregion.

Preston Montague, of Durham, N.C., a landscape architect and artist who teaches at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, in Greensboro, is among them. He contributed the Greensboro design, which he said is appropriate for landscapes between the foothills and the coastal plain of the Piedmont area, from Georgia into Pennsylvania.

The plant lists provided with each design make great cheat sheets for those who want to familiarize themselves with some of the best native choices for their own home landscape. (The Wild Ones website also provides a state-by-state list of native plant nurseries where they can be found.)

Mr. Montague's plan, like those of many other contributors, comes with guidance on site considerations and preparation. He recommends studying the space for a year before planting begins, to record its microclimates and find patches of existing habitat that can be connected to the new design — “even if it's simply a small tree by the street,” he said.

Many designers, including Mr. Montague, have done webinars to introduce the concepts in their plans, as part of the Wild Ones “Meet the Designers” series. (All are archived on the group's YouTube channel.) Plans from Heather McCargo, the founder of Wild Seed Project in Maine, and the prairie-style designer and author Benjamin Vogt are being added this fall. Ms. McCargo will kick off hers with a free webinar about the benefit of hedgerows on Sept. 19; on Oct. 24, Mr. Vogt will do one about matrix landscape designs — aesthetically pleasing, high-density plantings inspired by natural ecosystems.



Flowering native perennials like black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) and rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) join sedges and grasses in Mr. Montague's front yard in Durham, N.C. Preston Montague

Mr. Montague said he found the collaboration an especially good fit, and not just because he shares the group's commitment to promoting native landscaping: "We are both trying to translate very complicated ideas of landscape ecology into an approach that gardeners of all skill levels can deploy," he said.

Unless gardeners develop familiarity with their locally appropriate plant palette and get a solid introduction to some foundational principles of ecological design, those goals cannot be realized. "Native plants assembled according to native community structures and densities can be more complicated, can be a little hairier than perhaps more conventionally organized gardens," he said.

In a classical bed design, for example, you might put “three of this here and five of that there, and one big thing here,” he said. But these landscapes are more diverse.

“The conventional planting-design approach reminds me of my approach to acrylic paintings, which distills detail to simply a few layers overlapping,” Mr. Montague explained. His approach to oil painting, by comparison, “requires a lot of mixing and has a gradient of colors across the canvas.”

He encourages us to embrace this complexity — as if our planting designs were rendered in oil, “using a million strokes,” he said. “Dense and diverse plantings don’t reveal the weeds or gaps in seasonality like simpler, conventional gardens can.”



A demonstration garden being planted at the First Baptist Church of Greater Cleveland, a collaboration between Shaker Lakes Garden Club, the National Wildlife Federation and Wild Ones. Jessica Ausnehmer

Providing Ecosystem Services, Beautifully

Art analogies aside, Wild Ones members and the group's collaborating designers are quick to stress that this is not purely ornamental horticulture. They are striving to create plantings that provide ecosystem services, Mr. Montague said, not simply aesthetic pleasure. Although "gorgeous" is an important goal, too.

This dual focus is why he favors shrubs like inkberry (*Ilex glabra*) and various viburnums that offer resources to pollinators and fruit to birds, while serving as space-defining hedging that responds well to shaping with a string trimmer. He calls such shrubs "plastic," because their short internodes — the length of stem between nodes, or leaf attachments — make them well adapted to shearing.

Similarly, he recommends Cherokee sedge (*Carex cherokeensis*) as "a fantastic Liriope replacement and a sturdy all-purpose ground cover in many cases." Unlike the ubiquitous lilyturf (*Liriope*), an Asian native, the sedge is a larval host for certain Lepidoptera, and its seed is enjoyed by birds and small mammals.

For maximum ecological benefit, Mr. Montague said, more is better; plant density and diversity are required. He advises planting lavishly, using a mix of seed and small plants, or plugs.

"I find that if you supersaturate beds, particularly with seed, and then with a lot of plugs to exercise some design control," he said, "you may discover that actually the beds begin to sort themselves out based on competition. It takes a few years, but the species that will sustainably thrive in your garden will reveal themselves."

Don't start too "strict and clean and tidy," he advised. "Basically, I want to empower people to make a mess. And then you just manage the mess."



Prairie perennials greet summertime visitors in Appleton, Wis., at the former home of Loris Damerow, the president of the Wild Ones national board of directors. Barbara A. Schmitz

He encourages us to “stop thinking about plants as discrete objects and really think about plantings as vegetative bodies,” he said, adding: “If we’re not going to be fussy about species composition, then just think about these vegetative bodies as major shapes, and how those major shapes aesthetically organize a space or produce a reaction when viewed.”

From that viewpoint, it’s all right (and inevitable) for one species to disappear from the mix, and for another to gain territory. “I don’t want people to get too overwhelmed by the whys — just allow,” he said, meaning let things unfold.

Once all that seed and those plugs take hold, “you can just garden by subtraction,” Mr. Montague said. But he doesn’t subtract in the conventional sense, by pulling unwanted plants, a practice that backfires, bringing more weed seeds to the surface, where they germinate and compound the infestation.

“Our constant pulling was creating bigger weed problems,” he said. Instead, he “flosses or tweezes” unwanted species with the string trimmer, to give the desired species surrounding them the edge.

“You walk through those vegetative bodies with a string trimmer,” he said, “and if you just zap those species you don’t want, the species you leave alone tend to fill in the gap and dominate.”

Nutsedge, Bermuda grass and crab grass are also on his “just allow” list. “They’re going to be in the matrix anyway,” he said. “If you selectively zap them, flossing them out of the situation, they’ll remain, but in a better-behaved condition.”

It’s all in the re-education of the gardener.

“If I had a big word to underline in bold, it’s teaching people to allow,” Mr. Montague said. Allow the looser style to take hold; allow the diversity to return, as in those Wisconsin yards and others that followed their lead over the decades.

But be forewarned: This can be habit-forming.

“Once I got started gardening this way, I got bored to tears with conventional landscape planting,” Mr. Montague said. “I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

Margaret Roach is the creator of the website and podcast A Way to Garden, and a book of the same name.

If you have a gardening question, email it to Margaret Roach at gardenqanda@nytimes.com, and she may address it in a future column.