

St. Louis grows a native plant movement

Photo: Missouri Botanical Garden, Martha Adams

By Jean Ponzi

Ecology embodies relationships in place. Plants, critters, people, soil, water and weather interact through cycles of seasons, place based. Collaborative diversity cultivates health and wealth for all. In St. Louis, Missouri, a vibrant culture of humans relating to native plants is growing community capacity to understand, value and even restore ecological abundance.

We're thrilled that [Doug Tallamy](#), entomologist, native plant advocate and Wild Ones lifetime honorary director, cites our efforts. "You know I've talked all over the country," he said in a presentation here last year. "There are groups doing good things in California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Connecticut – but St. Louis is leading the way! You have so many groups and programs – some doing this work longer than me – using native plants to restore ecosystem function to human-dominated land-

scapes. That's what it's all about, and you guys are leaders!"

Encouraged by Tallamy to share what the St. Louis Wild Ones Chapter does and how it's working, I like to frame the story in plant terms. What are your site characteristics? Design in the limits of your region's palette of current strengths and plot out expansions. Throughout our tale, Wild Ones show up as a keystone species. How can your Wild Ones chapter leverage partnerships, project visibility, and access to plants to pollinate local successes?

A taproot of success here is our regional native plant marketing and education program, [Grow Native!](#) (GN!). Seeded in 2000 and grown through state tax support by Missouri departments of conservation and agriculture, the mature program was transplanted in 2012 to the nonprofit [Missouri Prairie Foundation](#). GN! now works in neighboring parts of Illinois, Kansas, Arkansas, Oklahoma

Skillful design showcases beauty and landscape performance potential of native plants in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden.

and Nebraska, a range that makes sense for plants native to our several biomes.

Early on, a visionary approach rooted equal focus on marketing, consumer education and professional development. Full-color materials (first print, soon online) featured basic planting plans, linking the idea of gardening with natives with the joyful, universal appeal of butterflies. The agriculture partnership encouraged growers, positioning native plants as value-adding agri-products. Green industry networking fostered continuing education credits through conferences, seminars and, as projects proliferated, site tours. Missouri was so fortunate to have GN! fostered by state agencies, with that three-lobed focus that any region could adapt.



Photo: Dale Duffer Studios

The compound GN! strategy continues in its third decade, including one major annual effort with high return on investment: updates to the *Crow Native! Resource Guide*. This full-color piece (online and still in print) provides efficient, vetted access to more than 150 professional members and sponsors – including Wild Ones Ozark and St. Louis Chapters – who supply native plant products and services, presented in plant-list format. The guide is a powerful enterprise tool for the 50 locally owned garden centers and wholesale and retail growers listed, who, in turn, supply verified native plants to meet burgeoning public demand, educate their customers, and con-

tribute fiscal support and intellectual capital back to GN!

Educational offerings team with knowledge and perspective drawn from the GN! affiliate network. Pandemic-prompted webinars and video tours mushroomed to reach new audiences and offer in-depth trainings, with minuscule costs. GN! is a central, respected source connecting plants, pros and the public to native aesthetics and benefits. Dig into *your* nearest native plant society or program!

Who can help the public start gardening with natives? Here, it's the birders. *Bring Conservation Home* or BCH, a program of St. Louis Audubon Society, sends trained volunteers

Rainscaping strategies using native plants demonstrate the economic and infrastructure value of landscaping with natives.

to assess characteristics of your place and recommend options to biodiverse your property with natives. Launched in 2012 after a pilot year, BCH has engaged over 1,400 landowner participants to cultivate more than 600 acres of suburban and urban neighborhood habitat, with a waiting list this summer of 200 applications.

Coordinated by 1.5 Audubon staff, the mighty person-power for BCH comes from a cadre of master naturalists and master gardeners, many who are Wild Ones members. These habitat advisers are trained to engage and educate homeowners during team visits and through written reports that detail existing native and invasive plants and suggest planting options customized for each site. Homeowners can opt to earn habitat certification at three levels by fulfilling defined ecological actions, validated by a return visit.

Our BCH structure was adapted from an Audubon chapter in Portland, Oregon. *Heartlands Conservancy* of southwestern Illinois began a sister program in 2019, Conservation at Home, to efficiently serve our region's Metro East communities. Modest participation fees support program staffing while growing Audubon membership and educational influence.

This elegantly simple, superbly interactive, transplantable program grounds a "friendly persuasion" toward native plant values in focused person-to-person exchange, geared to benefit each location. Relationships in place, indeed.

Vital to transforming aesthetics is getting to see native plants in well designed, well maintained public spaces. Around St. Louis today you



Photo: Dale Duffer Studios

Native plant sales that support public demand for the plants are a venue to learn from fellow native plant gardening fans, while growing business for local plant providers.



can visit or casually cruise by urban, suburban and rural native landscapes, but our dowager *Filipendula rubra*, our ultimate destination, is the Whitmire Wildflower Garden. This nationally renowned feature of Shaw Nature Reserve, the ecological research-focused rural property of the Missouri Botanical Garden, displays over 750 species of Missouri native plants in the garden's five acres, surrounded by 30 acres of reconstructed prairie and woodlands. The garden inspires with the beauty of native plants in settings both conventional and naturalistic.

Visitors can relate to native forbs, grasses, bushes and trees in small spaces, and across expansive vistas, seeing native plants in a water garden, as groundcovers, amid rocks, on a patio and a rooftop – and more. From this site's expert fusion of design and care, we can recognize native plants as high performers, then choose to tap their potential for personal, municipal and commercial landscapes, to benefit climate, human health and biodiversity.

Eight organizational Partners for Native Landscaping are our native plant culture feeder roots, reach-

ing St. Louisans in multiple ways to appreciate natives. Every spring since 2012, PNL has produced a day or more of resource-packed public programs, featuring our movement's stars - Doug Tallamy, Heather Holm, Larry Weiner, Neil Diboll and others – and a host of local and regional ecological landscaping experts.

Our COVID-year virtual pivot joined with a powerful new promo-partner, the St. Louis County Library, to present a series of eight Zoom talks by PNL representatives. Viewed live and on-demand, we reached 3,232 people with a near-zero carbon footprint! We enriched library offerings and grew a year-round audience for each group. Here's a brief overview of these partners' work.

BiodiverseCity St. Louis is a community-wide initiative based at the Missouri Botanical Garden and collaboratively led by a seven-organization team. BDV-STL curates and promotes use of biodiversity data and spotlights the native plant projects of businesses, homeowners and municipalities. How do you get biodiversity factored into community decisions? Document it! Make it vis-

Educational signs at many native plant sites interpret plant choices and functions, helping to evolve St. Louis landscaping choices.

ible, factual, popular and real from many sources.

From Grow Native!, in addition to the taproot work described, professional and public engagement addresses diverse stakeholder needs. For example, the Missouri Invasive Plant Council is vetting agricultural, public agency, landowner and ecological inputs toward a "Cease the Sale" campaign targeting problem species still on the market.

Our regional wastewater utility, Metropolitan Sewer District, has tapped in to low-cost rainscaping strategies powered by native plants. We are one of many cities with combined and aging storm and sanitary sewer systems, overtaxed by the kind of gully-washer rains that climate change has made common. Adding primarily plant-based green infrastructure into storm water management showcases native species' capacity to protect public health and property. How could some rainscaping demos prime this water cycle of benefits for your community?

Photo: Missouri Botanical Garden, Matilda Adams

Resources from the [Missouri Department of Conservation](#) provide native planting options and concerns for municipalities, private landowners and the planted rights-of-way used by power companies and transportation agencies. MDC cultivated Grow Native! and continually advocates for native plants. Taxpayer support is strong because MDC serves the common interests of environmental advocates and outdoor recreation enthusiasts, bridging ideological divides by helping all Missourians enjoy and responsibly steward nature. What state or county agency resources can boost your region's native plant movement?

Beyond its glorious wildflower borders, Shaw Nature Reserve is an educational resource. Native Plant School public classes are held year-round in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden, taught by staff and partners. Shaw Professional Series seminars and tours, coordinated by colleagues at the Garden's EarthWays Center, offer continuing education in landscape design, engineering, installation and maintenance emphasizing native plants. On-site work includes seed collecting, seed banking, research-based ecological restoration, native plant propagation, bi-annual plant sales – and year-round access to high-quality nature. Where can people in your community go to learn and see native plants?

While St. Louis Audubon is effectively promoting natives, their primary focus on birds helps all ages

learn, observe and feel welcome in nature. With Wild Ones, Audubon hosts an annual Native Plant Garden Tour; this spring 50 extra tickets released when COVID restrictions eased sold out in 30 minutes!

Who can we hire to do this work? [St. Louis Community College](#) is growing a specialized workforce to design, install and maintain native landscapes. Enrollment of 160+ makes STLCC Missouri's largest horticulture program, boosted by an eco-emphasis significantly augmenting more conventional content. The campus is a learning lab, where students aged 18-80 tend native landscaped grounds, run a greenhouse

2020. Wild Ones activity grounds people in relationships to native plants, through hearty healing work that is fun.

Three main forces are growing our St. Louis movement to native plants: partnerships, visibility and access to plants. Our community benefits from established, collaborative relationships and programs. Some are uniquely local and many you could adapt to advance our shared cause in your environment.

What are the strengths in your community? Tend them, share them, move them around as needed – in all the ways we love to learn from native plants.



Garden gatherings grow relationships and knowledge among native plant enthusiasts.

and plant sales, and conduct plant performance trials. Class schedules support working students, with 80% getting green industry jobs prior to graduation, while community-level tuition prevents a burden of debt.

With blooming generosity, [Wild Ones St. Louis Chapter](#) members bring skill, time and enthusiasm to every effort in this report. We are the largest among 60+ chapters with 300 members including more than 100 who have joined since September

Jean Ponzi serves as green resources manager for the EarthWays Center of Missouri Botanical Garden. Her city of St. Louis yard is forested with natives. A Wild Ones member with broad sustainability knowledge, she's available to speak through greenresources@mobot.org. Marsha Gebhardt and Dawn Weber, both of the Wild Ones St. Louis chapter, contributed to this article.