

Webster home is showcase for beauty of native plants

By Lucyann Boston
SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH
10/06/2006

Keep your eyes on 575 East Jackson Road in Webster Groves. That's the home of Nathan and Julie Jacobs and their newly landscaped front yard filled with native perennials, shrubs and trees. The property is the newest showcase in the St. Louis area for the beauty and benefits native plants can bring to home landscape.

The transformation of the Jacobses' yard occurred in just over three hours' time on a recent Saturday morning. It was so dramatic, neighbors gathered to watch, and cars slowed to ask what was happening. The makeover was exactly what the couple was hoping for last March when they entered and eventually won the Grow Native! Landscape Challenge. And all the attention is what the three organizations that issued the challenge were looking for. Sponsored by the Shaw Nature Reserve; Grow Native!, a program of the Missouri Department of Conservation, and Wild Ones, a volunteer organization that promotes the use of native plants, the challenge was designed to publicize the advantages of landscaping with plants that were growing in the Missouri countryside before the first settlers.

Out were the small boxwoods and the cement sidewalk at the front of the house. In was a neat span of flowering perennials and grasses near the house, a curved flagstone sidewalk (laid a few days prior to the planting) and a 250-square-foot wildflower meadow. Meadow plants included rose verbena, butterfly weed, fragrant (aromatic) aster, orange

coneflower, golden alexanders, lead plant and garden phlox.



*Webster Groves homeowners, Nathan and Julie Jacobs (far left) garden in their front yard along with volunteers from Wild Ones, a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of native plant communities.
(Becca Young / Special to the Post-Dispatch)*

Volunteers from Wild Ones quickly constructed a zigzag snake rail fence separating the meadow from the lawn. A screen of native trees underplanted with shrubby aromatic sumac, wild hydrangea and low-growing perennials such as wild ginger, bluebells and Jacob's ladder gave definition to the landscape and the east side of the residence. On the west side volunteers created a rain garden by carving out a 70-square-foot, 8-inch depression and digging a trench for an underground pipe that will funnel rain water from the downspout on the corner of the house to the area. When that was done they filled the depression with water-loving grasses and flowering perennials. Those plants included cardinal flower, hardy ageratum, soft rush, blue flag iris, rose mallow, meadow

phlox, Gray's sedge and Riddell's goldenrod.

Simon Barker of Barker Horticultural Services in Clarksville, Mo., who specializes in native plant landscapes, designed the space and met several times with Nathan and Julie to get their input. They requested a more manicured look close to the house and, as parents of a 6-year-old and a 3-year-old, wanted good visibility where their yard abutted the street.

Scott Woodbury, Whitmire curator of native plants at the Shaw Nature Reserve, collected plants for the project, laid the sidewalk and reinforced a slope on the east side of the house with several boulders shortly before the garden installation. One of the strongest features of the design, he feels, is that it allows visitors to walk through the garden either on the flagstone walk or lawn and look closely at the plants. In addition, he adds, "Two-thirds of the front lawn is gone and no longer has to be mowed, and the area is more beautiful with lots of different species that will bloom at different times of the year."

A rain garden was included in the project to demonstrate how rain water landing on hard surfaces can be recycled instead of running off into storm sewers and how perennially wet spots in the home landscape can be enhanced with the right plants. "Rain gardens are something we encourage people to do," said Barker.

High visibility of home helped Jacobses win

The minute they saw an announcement of the Grow Native! Landscape Challenge in a local newspaper, the Jacobses knew the

contest was made for them. Both graduate students -- Nathan is working on his doctorate in computer science at Washington University and Julie is working part-time on a master's degree in public health at St. Louis University -- they had moved to St. Louis from Columbia, Mo., one year ago. They love native plants. In Columbia, Nathan had created a wildflower garden outside their bedroom window, and he was set to do the same in St. Louis as an April 29 birthday gift to Julie. The wildflower garden was put on hold. "I just knew we'd win," Julie says.

As part of the contest, homeowners, required to live within the 631 ZIP code, were asked questions about their landscaping situation, experience with native plants and why they wanted a landscape makeover using native plants. They also had to agree to prepare the site for planting, maintain the landscape after it was complete and be willing to have their landscape used for educational and promotional efforts of the sponsoring organizations.

More than 70 homeowners entered the contest, which included receiving up to \$1,500 worth of native plants. Representatives from the three organizations narrowed the field to 13, and then visited each home looking for just the right size project. Helping the Jacobses' cause, according to Betty Struckhoff, project coordinator for Wild Ones, was the high visibility of their home, which is directly across the street from Webster Groves' popular Blackburn Park, "Every single time that we're out in the yard, a neighbor stops to talk to us about it," Julie says. "People are amazed when we tell them that all of the plants are native. Most of them have never considered why that might be important.

It's fun to give people something new to think about."

Why love native plants

With so many new and unusual plants to choose from, why should gardeners go back to natives that were here before the first settlers?

There are some practical and labor-saving reasons, say native plant expert Simon Barker of Barker Horticultural Services, who designed the Grow Native! landscape, and Scott Woodbury, Whitmire Curator of Native Plants for the Shaw Nature Reserve.

"I like natives because of their beauty, toughness and resilience," says Barker, noting the dramatic temperature and moisture fluctuations in this part of the country. "St. Louis is not the best place to garden, and these plants do so well in our area. They will always come back and always work well as long as you put them

in the right spot."

When it comes to maintenance, natives are not as fussy about soil conditions, fertilization and moisture levels as other plants, which saves homeowners time and money. But that doesn't mean they are totally carefree. "There is maintenance, and there are weeds," Barker says with a laugh. "Lots of weeds are non-native. They came over here from Europe and need to be pulled out before they seed and take over."

While some native species can tend to overgrow and cause people to think of all native landscapes as wild looking, others "are tidy and well behaved," Barker emphasizes. "Up close to the house we have drifts of perennials that can be manicured and deadheaded."

In addition, Woodbury emphasizes, native plants attract and provide a habitat for native wildlife. They act as a beacon for birds, butterflies and bees.

[In photo: Nathan & Julie, Bill & Marilyn Chryst, Ed Schmidt, Fran Glass.]