



# Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

SUMMER 2022 • *Journal* • VOL. 35, NO. 2

*A voice for the natural landscaping movement.*

**Editor's Note:** We'd like to feature members' native gardens, large or small, in upcoming issues. If you're interested in sharing your native garden, send four to six high-resolution photos, as well as a brief description, to [journal@wildones.org](mailto:journal@wildones.org). Please include your contact information so we can follow up.

## Member Garden

Lisa Brunette and Anthony Valterra  
St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter

All photos courtesy Lisa Brunette  
and Anthony Valterra

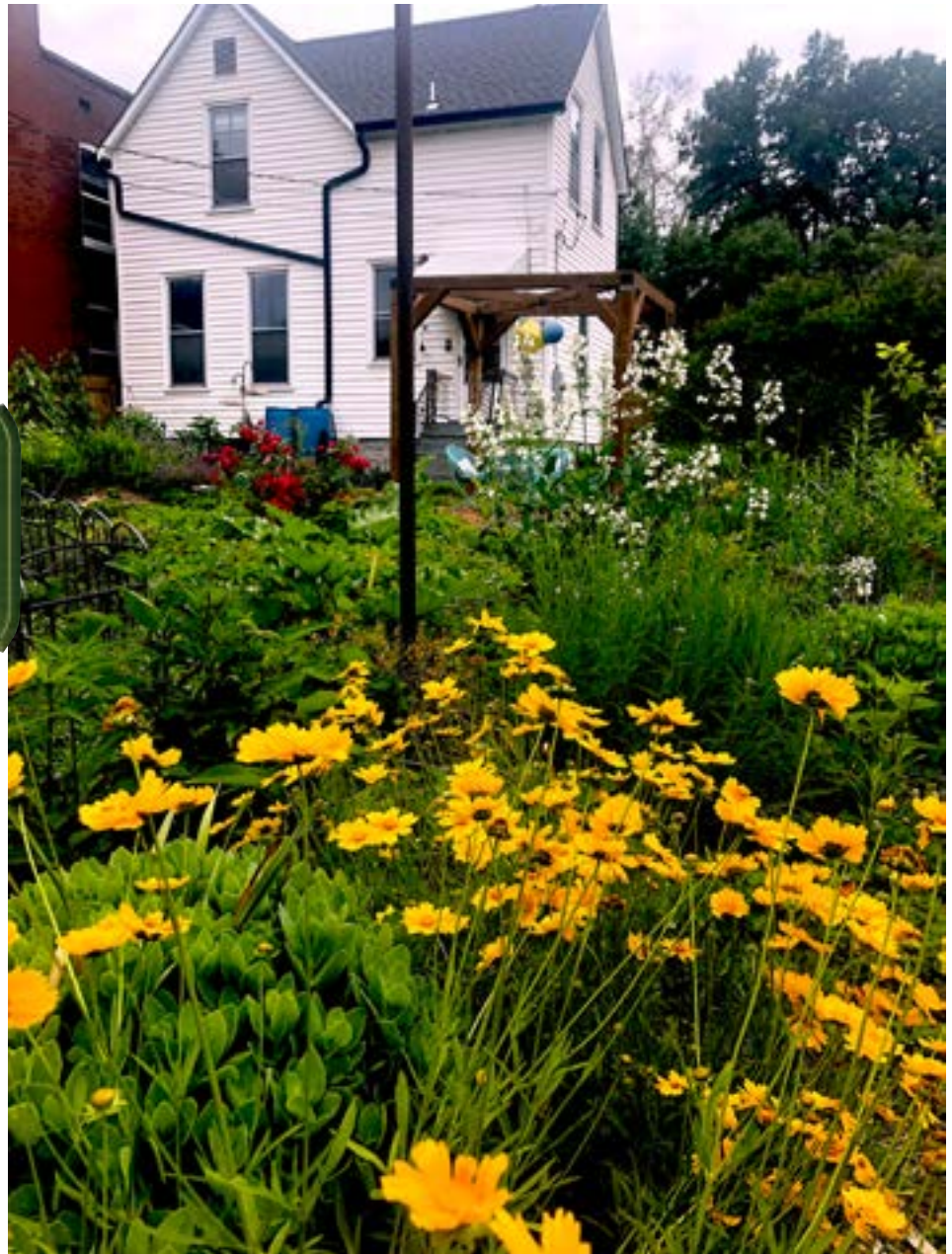
by Barbara A. Schmitz

Lisa Brunette and her husband Anthony Valterra don't like to waste time or effort. So it's no surprise that after less than three years, their yard received top honors in the St. Louis Audubon Society's Bring Conservation Home (BCH) program.

Lisa says they were awarded platinum certification in spring 2021, a status achieved by fewer than 2% of all gardens enrolled in the program. The two purchased their Maplewood, Missouri home on a ¼-acre suburban lot in 2017, when Lisa moved back to the St. Louis area after living nearly two decades in the Pacific Northwest, where she met Anthony. Then, in fall 2019, BCH did an assessment of their yard. The BCH recommendations served as their inspiration and gave them good ideas on how to proceed.

"They were able to identify what we should take out and what we might want to put in," Lisa says.

But they don't design it for you, Anthony stresses, saying the two are entirely self-taught. "Lisa read every [Doug] Tallamy book and together we attended a lot of Wild Ones events and tours." And as they learned, their vision of what could be slowly came into focus.



Colorful native plants surround the rear of the Brunette/Valterra home, complete with rain barrels.

Working within a budget, they also took advantage of free or low-cost plants and seeds, many from Wild Ones members, Anthony says.

"We have removed invasive plants covering the property and planted close to 150 species of native trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses, including a rain garden, forest canopy and rocky glade areas," Lisa says. Their garden features a rock habitat for snakes and lizards, a brush area where Eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridians*) have nested in the past, edible native fruit and nut trees, oak, black gum, a bat house, bird baths and feeders, and a native

groundcover mix of violet and geranium in place of turf.

But that's not all. They also conserve water through a rain barrel collection system.

Lisa says they did the majority of the work, only hiring out for projects too big to do themselves, like removing a perimeter chain link fence covered in invasive honeysuckle and winter creeper, or planting a row of mature eastern red cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) along their fence line.

They started landscaping with trees and shrubs, as well as sheet mulching to remove the backyard lawn, she says. (Check out their

## Member Garden

Lisa Brunette and Anthony Valterra  
St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter



Left: Lisa Brunette enjoys weeding her garden, as well as eating all of its bountiful produce. Right: Anthony Valterra builds a squash tunnel out of bamboo, allowing the plants to grow up and over rather than along the ground.

blog to see how they did it.) Once the grass had been replaced with a groundcover mix of native violets and geraniums, they started adding native grasses and flowers.

Lisa admits that she's a nerd when it comes to planning, and her husband is the muscle and contributor. "She's more plant-oriented and I'm more landscaped-oriented," Anthony explains.

They say they've made some mistakes along the way, especially as they became reacquainted with four seasons and plants going dormant in the winter.

"Winter creates such a drastically different landscape and it's easy to forget where things are," Lisa says, adding that they accidentally pulled out things like milkweed that were mistaken for weeds in the spring.

To avoid future mishaps like that, they've learned to communicate better about what they're editing out. It helps that from the beginning, Lisa kept a garden journal, but she said they don't always think to check it when they're working in the yard.

Their yard also includes a food garden located near the kitchen, but native plants are woven throughout their property, Lisa adds, noting that a good portion of their food comes

from their garden. They've added pawpaw trees, elderberries, blueberries, raspberries, persimmon trees and native herbs, just to name a few native edibles.

The only grass on their property is in the front yard, and they've kept it because they were unsure if the neighbors were ready for a grass-free landscape. Still, the grass is the smallest portion of their lot and eventually, it will go, too.

For those new to native landscaping, the two would encourage people to do lots of research, join Wild Ones and take advantage of programs like the BCH.

"St. Louis is amazing for having resources available for little or no cost," Anthony says. "Get recommendations, find helpful references..." and figure out what you want to do."

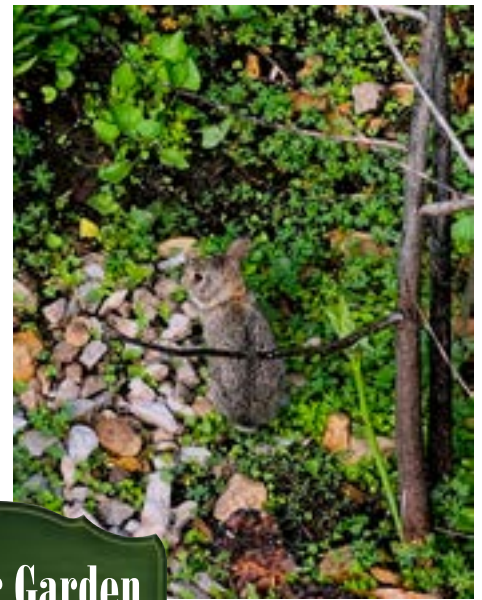
In fact, they're still figuring out what they want to do with some areas of their property.

"In the front yard, a bunch of azaleas need to come out," Lisa says. Anthony adds: "You're never done. It's a process like life. Something is always growing or dying..."

"Gardening is a bit like swimming," Lisa says. "You can read many books about swimming, but

## About the property

- Lisa Brunette and Anthony Valterra have a ¼-acre lot in Maplewood, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis.
- They say it is difficult to agree on which plants are their favorites. "But the witch hazel's February fiery flowers are a welcome sight for sore eyes after the long brown winter, and it's hard to top the gorgeous pink blooms of purple coneflower," Lisa says. "Both are medicinal as well, so they tick my human-use box, in addition to serving wildlife and pollinators."
- According to the Audubon Society's Bring Conservation Home assessment, their property is 77% natural landscaping. The two have planted nearly 150 native species, as well as removed many nonnative invasive species.
- The yard's highlight is the overall design which includes, "the forest grove on the north corner, which will take shape as the trees mature, growing anywhere from 30 to 110 feet tall over time, to the rocky glade area where purple poppy mallow (*Callirhoe involucrata*) clammers over what my young niece calls a 'rock nest,' a habitat for snakes and lizards," Lisa says. "We've identified DeKay's brown-snake (*Storeria dekayi*), and they seem to control the slugs that would otherwise eat our garden lettuce. It's all working together well — the naturoscaping and the food garden."
- As they've added more native plants to their yard, the number of insects and wildlife have increased as well. Through a citizen science partnership program called Shutterbee, Lisa has made 434 observations of 22 different species on their property since 2020, including a threatened species, the American bumblebee (*Bombus pensylvanicus*), and pollinator specialists, such as the pruinose squash bee (*Peponapis pruinosa*). The garden is also regularly visited by cardinals, goldfinches, downy woodpeckers, ruby-throated hummingbirds, white-throated sparrows, Carolina wrens, chipping sparrows, and many other birds, including both Cooper's and red-shouldered hawks.
- The couple chronicled their yard transformation on their blog, Brunette Gardens, where they also share tips for creating wildlife habitats and gardening with natives.



Clockwise from left: Their 1/4-acre lot is home to about 150 native species; An Eastern cottontail rabbit (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) takes refuge in their rain garden. These rabbits are native to much of the eastern United States; A DeKay's brownsnake (*Storeria dekayi*) in the Brunette/Valterra garden. The snake is a small, secretive species that prefers a moist environment.

until you get into the water, you don't know anything. Gardening is like that. There will always be plants that you think will work well in your yard and don't. You're always learning and experimenting."

Overall, their neighbors have been receptive to the changes they've made in their yard. One neighbor, an arborist, helped his landlord remove an invasive tree of heaven, replacing it with an oak, which extends their native habitat by one more yard-length. And with apartments on both sides of their home, their other neighbors enjoy looking down at the view.

But they also try to educate those who don't understand what they are doing and why.

"We had a landlord on the other side spraying chemicals along our fence line," Anthony recalls. "We were friendly and told him we were eating plants on the other side of the fence, even offering him free mulch." The landlord listened, and they're hopeful he got the message.

Lisa says that native plant gardening is proof that "if you build it, they will come."

"I think most people would be amazed at the rich diversity in wildlife and the insect world you can

attract, even if you're in a suburban metropolitan area like ours," she says. "I've identified hanging robber flies, stilt bugs, leafhoppers and many different beetles. We've had encounters with opossums, racoons, chipmunks and whole families of rabbits."

Anthony and Lisa are full-time small business owners and Gen Xers who maintain their gardens despite their busy lives.

"For us, gardening is exercise, therapy and nature bathing, all rolled into one," Lisa says. "For me in particular, it's a great passion, the second love of my life after Anthony and our family."