



# Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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*A voice for the natural landscaping movement.*

# Wild Ones honors a native plant champion

By Jean Ponzi

On July 1, Scott Woodbury gave his professional care of Missouri's Whitmire Wildflower Garden into new hands, having tended this native-planted gem for 30 years. He turns his focus to family care, while staying strong in his gardening partnership with nature.

Almost 25 years ago, Woodbury founded the Wild Ones St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter after being encouraged by Bret Rappaport, lawyer and then Wild Ones national president. While planning the annual two-day native plant conference at the Shaw Nature Reserve, Woodbury saw an article by Rappaport about his representation of clients charged with weed ordinance violations in the Chicago area. Woodbury immediately invited him to be a keynote speaker on that topic at the upcoming conference.

To the 250 attendees, Rappaport presented the importance of educating municipalities about the benefits of native plants in order to change weed ordinances. Rappaport also told Woodbury that due to the extraordinary amount of interest in native landscaping in the St. Louis area, "you need a Wild Ones Chapter." The rest is regional history, with the St. Louis chapter now the largest Wild Ones chapter in the country.

Since then, Wild Ones members and a national host of native plant enthusiasts have heard, met or read Woodbury's wisdom at conferences, in articles, through videos, or in Native Plant School or Shaw Professional Series classes and tours, hosted by Shaw Nature Reserve, the rural holdings of Missouri Botanical Garden. Some of you may have worked along-



Scott Woodbury snips and saves seeds at the Shaw Nature Reserve.

side Scott on the 5-plus acres where he knew the plants in every bed.

How did this gardening laureate take root in ecological ground?

Growing up in Rockford, Illinois, Woodbury recalls the spring he was in eighth grade. "I raked leaves, I did some gardening, and one day I *watched* a bleeding heart grow," he says. "So fast! I thought it was fooling me! I met the magic of plants."

Woodbury studied horticulture at UW-Madison, where training in the 1980s was structured and conventional. "Hort[iculture] had a standard of practice in working with plants," he recalls. "That did inspire me to get where I am, but the program at that time was missing an emphasis on native plants and landscaping."

He tapped into these trends

through courses in botany and landscape design and wanted to re-enroll, but after graduation he had to go to work.

He first got a job on the Georgetown estate of a granddaughter of Martha Washington, a formal garden around an historic home – with a woodland! Woodbury replaced English ivy and wintercreeper with native plants he discovered in the woods, and others he was able to find in obscure corners of local garden centers. This job led Woodbury to his native plant vocation, taking him west to Shaw Nature Reserve.

Woodbury says that learning from mistakes is important in gardening.

"You start tinkering, you fail and learn and realize your mistakes are golden!" he says. "I've always told



Photo: Missouri Botanical Garden

Wild Ones St. Louis President Marsha Gebhardt works with Scott Woodbury in the Trial Garden.

new employees and volunteers to celebrate their failures as much as their successes. You'll score points from your mistakes when you're willing to make them, learn from them and keep gardening.

"Gardeners like working with our hands; we like being outside," Woodbury says. "This is the opposite of plant science courses that are analytical, theoretical. When we feel free to mess around, we're more at ease, in the garden, with the plants, and more willing to explore and practice new stuff."

This guiding value, Woodbury's gift to so many fellow gardeners, would grow to empower a native plant movement, through a birthday gift now known worldwide as the Whitmire Wildflower Garden.

When he came to work at Shaw Nature Reserve, hiking trails were the 2,400-acre site's prime attraction. Visitors like Peg Whitmire, and her best friends Betty Nellums and Janet Ulmer, often made the half-hour trip from St. Louis to study or simply enjoy nature and take wildflower walks.

"They just loved wildflowers!" Woodbury recalls. "When Blanton Whitmire asked Betty and Janet what his wife would like for her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, their response was inspired: a wildflower garden, out at Shaw, that others could also enjoy. Blanton floated the idea to longtime Shaw director John Behrer who immediately supported the new garden. Thanks to a generous gift from the Whitmires, the Missouri Botanical Garden hired Marshall Tyler Rausch, one of the biggest landscape design firms in the country, to design the new wildflower space, which was established in 1993.

Today, paths thread through woodland, wetland, glade, savanna and prairie communities planted with more than 500 Missouri native species. A home gardening area showcases options for perennial, rock, container, rain and water gardens.

Woodbury is modest in describing his role. "I was the technician, the guy who came in to implement this super-professional plan," he says. "I have a brain for the technical aspects,

for making a garden work. I manage the shovels, dig the holes and move the plants around as the garden evolves. We learn from the plants and the communities they form."

He credits three key partners for the garden's ecological excellence: the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC); Mervin Wallace, founding owner of [Missouri Wildflowers Nursery](#); and Carol Davit, executive director of the [Missouri Prairie Foundation](#), and its program *Grow Native!*

"When MDC became a contributor to this garden, we were obligated by that funding," Woodbury says. "Our MDC relationship solidified a serious dedication to promoting the native plants of Missouri. I come from the tradition of conventional gardening, so Mervin and Carol were sounding boards for me."

Wallace sent over a copy, hot off the presses, of "Bringing Nature Home," the first book from [Doug Tallamy](#). He recalls with a mentor's pride, "At the next Native Plant School, Scott was teaching Tallamy's message."

Davit says: "Scott has shared his knowledge of plant selection and design with thousands of people, as well as his understanding of native landscaping maintenance and the ecological benefits of natives. This work - and his generous contributions to it - are making a tremendous impact on a more sustainable future for all."

Quinn Long, Shaw Nature Reserve's director since 2017, says the Whitmire Wildflower Garden has grown to become the finest demonstration of native plant horticulture in the Midwest.

"The legacy of this remarkable landscape exhibits the convergence of Scott's exceptional knowledge and vision, the inspiring philanthropy of the Whitmire family and other generous supporters, and the passion and skill of numerous dedicated staff and volunteers over the course of nearly three decades," Long says. "This mag-



Native plantings frame a long view.

Photo: Natilda Adams, Missouri Botanical Garden

ical setting will continue to inspire generations to come, demonstrating how native plants can create landscapes that are aesthetically pleasing and ecologically beneficial.”

Woodbury’s work has actively evolved the field of horticulture at St. Louis Community College, with horticulture program director Jerry Pence as key partner in the shift. “Hort[iculture] got a 180 [degree] update through an emphasis on native plants,” he says. “When Jerry started there, he’d invite me to come in and teach one session in the woodies course, one in the perennials course, only a couple of hours each semester.”

The two collaborated to offer Native Landscaping Practices, a full hands-on advanced course covering planning and design, site evaluation and preparation, problems and solutions with native landscaping, invasive plants, development of rain gardens using native plants, and best

management practices. Shaw Nature Reserve hosts seven weeks of this class; the other nine weeks are spent steadily transforming turf around the college’s Meramec campus into biodiverse living learning labs.

Woodbury, a quiet rockstar, is a regular on Professional Days, encouraging future colleagues in a program where 80% of students get green industry jobs prior to graduation. Peak demand is from employers focused on native plant horticulture.

Woodbury plans to let himself “go off the rails” after leaving the Whitmire Wildflower Garden. “I want to do garden design that helps people who are stuck in a conventional mode grow gardens that explore how conventions can work with ecology. I want to help people start where they are and wild their yards. Wilding gets us to work with nature, to learn from nature’s processes.”

Woodbury sums up from a Whitmire memory: “One early morning

out in the garden I saw a bumblebee, asleep on a flower, covered in dew, nestled onto a blossom of rosinweed. I’m touched by seeing a moment, a relationship like this. Not by reading about it. These kinds of connections inspire me, can and will hopefully inspire others to get that plant in the ground, to get out into the yard and experience nature. In a garden.

“Even in a little yard, when you put in some native plants, you can see the insects and other critters those plants will support,” he says. “You will have facilitated those relationships! You have the power to wild your yard. Could be the best thing you ever did.”

*Jean Ponzi serves as green resources manager for the EarthWays Center of Missouri Botanical Garden. Her St. Louis yard is forested with native plants. A Wild Ones member with broad sustainability knowledge, she’s available to speak through [greenresources@mobot.org](mailto:greenresources@mobot.org).*