



Wild Ones[®]

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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*A voice for the natural landscaping movement.
Working toward the next four decades of growing native plants
and restoring natural landscapes.*



Native plantings take up most of the Leahy front yard.

Sue Leahy admits she knew nothing about native plants, and says she wasn't even much of a gardener in 2007.

But 12 years ago, she decided to add a butterfly garden to her yard. So she went to local nurseries and purchased plants that noted on their labels that they were good for butterflies. Next, she enlisted the help of a friend, who just happened to be very much into natives.

"She brought over some of her natives," Leahy recalls. "We planted the bed, went to lunch, and when we came back 30 minutes later, the bed was covered in butterflies! Talk about validation that I was trying to do the right thing."

Leahy says that as the summer wore on, the plants she had pur-

chased died out while the natives her friend gave her were going strong. "I started asking questions and she brought me some more, including my first cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)," Leahy says. "When it bloomed and I saw the hummer on it, I was hooked for good. I have never looked back."

Today, Leahy's native area includes two butterfly gardens, two rain gardens, two mixed shrub beds and various other plantings. Except for her small house, patio and two-car driveway, her 55-by-225 yard is heavily planted in natives, including trees, shrubs, groundcovers and flowers.

Naturally, it didn't happen overnight. "My husband, Andy, and I did all of it ourselves," Leahy says. "As we learned more about natives,

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Sue Leahy

St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter

All photos courtesy Sue Leahy

Editor's Note: We'd like to feature 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 barbara.a.benish@gmail.com or journal@wildones.org. Please include your contact information so we can get in touch with you.

each year we decided on a new project to complete."

Andy has built stone walls, removed turf, put in edging and helped with bed preparation and planting.

"After the first butterfly garden, we put in the first rain garden," she



About the Yard

- Sue Leahy started planting native plants in 2007 because she wanted to create a butterfly garden. Today her native area includes two butterfly gardens, two rain gardens, two mixed shrub beds and various other plantings.
- They installed a 9-by-11-pond with 65-foot stream leading into it in 2007, but at that time, didn't incorporate native plants. However, when they replaced a large part of their nonnatives with natives in 2013, they saw a surge in native wildlife. Today, toads visit their stream and pond in the spring and early summer to mate and lay eggs so they also get lots of tadpoles.
- At last count, the Leahy property included over 200 native species in their 55-by-225 yard, located in Brentwood, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis.
- Those natives bring in a variety of visitors to their yard, including butterflies, such as monarchs, black and tiger swallowtails, red admirals, painted ladies, buckeyes and others; lots of bees of all sizes; other insects such as the blue darner dragonfly; and birds, such as blue jays, cardinals, cedar waxwings, chickadees, goldfinches, red-bellied woodpeckers and others. They also see red-tailed and cooper's hawks regularly, and have had some one-time visits from a pair of mallard ducks and a great blue heron that eyed the fish in their pond. Plus, they find box turtle hatchings regularly.

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Above, left: Each spring and early summer, the Leahys enjoy watching the tadpoles transform in their pond. Below, left: Natives add vibrant color to the yard (from front to back) with wild columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), Robin's plantain (*Erigeron pulchellus*), golden grousel (*Packera obovata*) and others.

recalls. "We already had two downspouts draining out through a pipe into the yard and decided to capture the runoff with a rain garden. We also had a drainage problem from a neighbor, which resulted in the second large rain garden. We got a grant from the local water/sewer district to pay for part of that one."

While her gardens may be complete, Leahy says she isn't done working on them. "I am constantly editing my perennial beds, relocating plants that didn't work and putting in different ones I want to try," she says. "I used to be afraid to move plants



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A bench in the back yard makes for a perfect place for the Leahys to sit and observe nature at work.

once they were planted; now I move them around all the time.”

Not surprisingly, one of her favorite plants is the cardinal flower because it attracts hummingbirds. Another favorite is the New England aster (*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*). “When my New England aster blooms, it is so covered in bees and butterflies that it looks like it’s quivering,” she says. “Something is blooming in my yard from February through November.”

With more than 200 native plants, the Leahy yard is filled with diversity. “I have very few nonnatives left as they have been periodically replaced as we went along,” she says. That diversity means her yard is filled with butterflies, bees, birds,

and much more.

Most of the natives in her yard are tagged with laser-engraved aluminum weatherproof markers, courtesy of her husband. Those signs came about after Andy kept asking her the names of plants and remarked that he was a visual learner. When they got a new laser engraver at the machine shop where he works, and he needed to practice, he made the nameplates for their plants with both common and scientific names. Now about 85% of their plants are clearly identified. “You can take yourself on a self-guided tour of my yard,” she says.

A member of the St. Louis chapter of the Wild Ones, Leahy has been on the board in charge of publicity

and marketing for three years. “I’ve really worked to give Wild Ones a community presence,” she says. “I thought if everyone knows about Audubon Society, they should also know about Wild Ones since they are both national organizations. Wild Ones should be a household word...”

For those new to native landscaping, she suggests: “Don’t do it all at once, especially if you’re working on a blank slate. Pick a project or garden you want to make native and start with that. Start small or it will get overwhelming.”

Her other advice would be not to till up the soil when creating a new garden. She learned that the hard way. One fall, they tilled up the soil to plant a row of hedges. By



Above: Purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*), and orange coneflowers (*Rudbeckia fulgida*).
 Below: Snow on vines and stalks of native plants can create a winter wonderland in your yard.



spring, they had a prize crop of Star of Bethlehem, an invasive. “Normally it grows in small bunches and we didn’t even know it was back there,” she says. “But when we tilled the soil, we broke the clumps into smaller pieces and it was everywhere.”

It’s taken a few years of digging up the invasive on their hands and knees, but Leahy said they finally have it under control.

Leahy recalls hearing Doug Tallamy speak in 2014, and leaning over to her husband to say, “We’re not done.” So they continued planting natives.

In 2018, she heard Tallamy speak again. “And although I already have a yard full of natives, we decided to plant two more trees — another oak in the back and a cherry in the front, two of his top picks.”

Leahy says they’ve had some cool experiences since going native, including a sighting of their first Luna moth and seeing a swarm of dragonflies one evening. She has also started raising monarchs.

“I started raising monarchs because I wanted to see the whole process, from egg to butterfly, and I knew they had a low survival rate

in the wild and I thought I could improve that a little,” she says. Today, almost 100% of the monarchs she raises survive.

Leahy isn’t just working in her own yard these days. After retirement, she started working part-time at a garden center, and now she’s in charge of the native plant section and has greatly expanded its collection. She’s also created a “pollinator palace” with signs about where people can get more information on natives, including Audubon, Xerces, Monarch Watch and Wild Ones, of course.

Last year Andy gave her a greenhouse for Christmas, and now she’s also experimenting with propagating plants. “It’s a learning process,” she says.

In fact, the last 12 years have been a learning process, but it’s been worth all the effort. “My neighbor across the street paid me a great compliment when he was comparing my yard to the neighbor’s,” she recalls. “He said they both looked nice, but mine was alive. I said, ‘Thank you; that’s what I was going for!’”