



# Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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Cover Photo: Kay Searfoss

*A voice for the natural landscaping movement.*



# Combatting climate change leads youth to Wild Ones

By Donna Short

Ryan Cutrell isn't just a teenager concerned about things like grades, athletics and school clubs. The high school senior is also concerned about the environment, and the Wild Ones St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter helped him take his interest to a whole new level.

Four years ago, Ryan, then 13, watched the 2016 National Geographic documentary "Before the Flood," which describes the impact of climate change on the environment. He decided to research what action he could take individually. His research led him to the effects of nonnative honeysuckle and how it smothers native plant growth.

He decided to remove the honeysuckle from the common ground that abuts his family's property. Ryan spent more than 100 hours on what quickly became a family project. Work included cutting down the honeysuckle and injecting weed killer into the stumps (by Dad, of course). The next step was the tedious job of hauling the brush streetside for the yard waste pickup. But Ryan decided to ask for help; he approached a City Council member who agreed to have the park maintenance department pick up the invasive species instead.

Ryan's mother, Amy, had heard of Wild Ones from a co-worker and thought this group might be a good match for Ryan's developing interest in nature. Ryan attended his first Wild Ones gathering in 2018 in Kirkwood, a suburb of St. Louis. Amy said that when he heard people talking about removing honeysuckle and about the benefits of native plants, he knew he had "found his people!"



Photo: Amy Cutrell



Photo: Donna Short

Top: Ryan spent more than 100 hours removing honeysuckle from the common ground that abuts his family's property. Above: View of the area after honeysuckle removal. The current view shows how the native foliage subsequently developed and revealed two healthy pawpaw trees (*Asimina triloba*) and a black walnut (*Juglans nigra*).





Ryan attends his first Wild Ones gathering in 2018. Photo by Marsha Gebhardt

As the honeysuckle project progressed, Ryan and Amy decided to tackle the erosion problem in their yard caused by a neighbor's runoff that often resulted in large puddles in their yard. They contacted St. Louis Audubon Society's Bring Conservation Home program for on-site advice. Based on the recommendations, they planted rain garden plants on the hillside and eliminated the erosion problem and puddles.

Ryan has participated in various Wild Ones St. Louis planting projects, participated in the group seedling order, and shared plants and seeds at Garden Gatherings, in addition to winning the 2020 Landscape Challenge, an annual competition for a native plant front yard makeover that includes the services of a native landscape designer, up to \$600 worth of native plants, as well as volunteers to install the landscape. Wild Ones St. Louis Chapter, with the support of Grow Native!, sponsors the annual competition.

The chapter also holds a monthly gathering at the home of one of its members or an interesting community native plant garden. One of the summer gatherings was at the Cutrell

home. In addition to volunteering as a garden host, Ryan has the distinction of being the youngest member of the St. Louis chapter.

In order to save up for college and expand his knowledge of plants, Ryan is working at a local garden center with a dedicated native plant area. He answers questions and advises on native plant care and use.

A high school senior, Ryan has accumulated more than 300 service hours of which 90% are environment/ecology oriented in locations such as the Sophia M. Sachs Butterfly House, Shaw Nature Reserve, Great Rivers Greenway and Operation Stream Clean.

Ryan's accolades for his home's native landscape include Gold Certification from St. Louis Audubon Society's Bring Conservation Home and inclusion in the 2022 St. Louis Native Plant Tour. His home also received the City of Maryland Heights Eco Award given by the City Beautification Commission. Ryan consistently receives academic recognition and is a member of his high school tennis team, science club, chess club and the Junior Academy of Science.

He volunteers regularly at his former elementary school's STEM Lab, helping children in grades K-5 understand and appreciate science. There wasn't a lab when Ryan was a younger student, and in the fourth grade, he successfully addressed the board of education to advocate for a lab and dedicated science instructor at Rose Acres. He said teaching youth science is as rewarding as learning science.

Ryan intends to specialize in evolutionary and biological sciences in college, eventually hoping to earn his doctorate degree as he works to discover solutions to major environmental problems. Right now, Ryan is submitting college scholarship applications. One of his scholarship application essays is about scaling up his honeysuckle removal project to a national level! Of course, as a senior he needs the necessary senior pictures and naturally, his native plant garden provides the background.

Ryan said that he really appreciates Wild Ones.

"It's such a great knowledge pool and it's wonderful to associate with people who share my interests in ecology and plants," he said.

Of course, Amy has been a key component providing encouragement and sweat equity along the way. His advice to other teens is not surprising. "Go outside and learn about nature!"

*Donna Short is a member of the St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter of Wild Ones. She became committed to native plants after Wild Bird Rehabilitation, where she volunteers, converted their urban landscape to natives and immediately saw an influx of pollinators and birds.*

Do you have youth in your Wild Ones chapter who are inspiring other members to do their part to protect the earth and its resources? Email us their details at [journal@wildones.org](mailto:journal@wildones.org).