



Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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A voice for the natural landscaping movement.

School may be out, but it's still time to learn

Summer didn't want to arrive in Wisconsin this year. I spent a cold, windy morning on Earth Day clearing trash along the shore of Lake Winnebago. My husband and I picked up a lot of beer cans, fishing lures and bait containers, and homework that never got turned in from the nearby elementary and middle school.

It's all about making a difference, and that is where Wild Ones and its myriad of chapters and members stand out. They help their communities, educating neighbors, friends, family and others about the benefits of natural landscaping, and how they can make a difference even with topics as serious as climate change.

In fact, one of the best things about being editor of the *Wild Ones Journal* is that I always keep learning more about native landscaping. And in this issue, I learned a lot.

For instance, I've learned jumping worms scare me, and I don't want them on my property. (OK, I knew that before.) But as people become more knowledgeable about this invasive worm, the better off our gardens will be. If you don't live in the 34 states that are currently home to this worm that likes to thrash and turn soil into something that resembles coffee grounds, be sure to read the story on [Page 34](#), especially if your chapter is considering hosting a plant swap or sale.

A similar lesson could be learned from Wild Ones member Andrea Matthies's battle with stiltgrass. In her email to me, Andrea wrote: "The local land stewards keep saying that it is so fortunate that it happened on our land instead of someone less tuned into land stewardship and that community. I get that. But Jim and I could really have done without this. Garlic mustard seems like child's play." Again, educating others about that nasty grass and how to identify it is one of the key ways to stop its spread. Read more on [Page 44](#).

This issue also features monarch news as we continue our 2023 series. Beca Schweitzer writes about some of the insects that can be found on milkweed ([Page 16](#)), while Mackenzie Seymour warns that monarch populations will continue to decline if humans don't do anything to stop it. ([Page 37](#)).

The need to get children involved in nature and native landscaping is evident. Krystal Coxon describes how she's made her children "investigators" as she helps them see the wonders in their yard. Learn how you can do the same on [Page 28](#).

So, when rain is forcing you to stay inside, get comfy on your couch or sit down with a beverage and enjoy this issue. And better yet, if you have story ideas you'd like to share, email journal@wildones.org. Our members and chapters are doing so much good; help us spread the word!

— Barbara A. Schmitz



Barbara A. Schmitz

Promoting environmentally sound landscaping practices to preserve biodiversity through the preservation, restoration and establishment of native plant communities

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Established in 1977, Wild Ones is a national not-for-profit organization of members who teach the benefits of growing native plants and work together to grow and restore natural landscapes.

Wild Ones' definition of a native plant:
A native plant is a species that occurs naturally in a particular region, ecosystem and/or habitat and was present prior to European settlement.

5 News

8 Member garden

12 Whiting forest

16 Milkweed for monarchs

19 Sex lives of plants

22 Weedman recognized

24 Seeds for education

28 Sharing nature

32 Book review

34 Jumping worms

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Left: The author's daughter finds a praying mantis and holds it close to her face for a better look. Right: Another daughter expresses her delight in finding her first lightening bug in their front yard.

Sharing nature with kids

By Krystal Coxon

I'm in the backyard with my three kids who are collecting sticks to make a pretend fire. I walk over to check on the new spicebushes I planted the previous season. I notice that some of the leaves are curled and I'm worried that they didn't receive enough water.

As my focus and concentration increases, my kids take notice and come over and ask what I'm doing. I'm investigating. I gently open one leaf and am surprised to find a tiny brown and white caterpillar inside. My enthusiasm is contagious, and the kids get closer to look, their curiosity beginning to bubble over.

They search for curled leaves until we've found every last one of them. We take pictures, we ask how

the caterpillars got there, we wonder what butterfly visited the shrub, and then we set about finding answers. A quick internet search tells us the spicebush swallowtail caterpillars make daily leaf tents with special webbing to protect themselves from predators. The kids begin to search for caterpillars in tents every day and wonder what other wildlife is visiting our 1/3-acre, suburban yard.

When my husband and I bought a home outside of St Louis nearly eight years ago, we knew we wanted a native plant-filled yard to share nature with our kids. We wanted to have an outdoor space that fostered curiosity and sparked creative play. The house we bought had a few boxwoods in the front yard and luckily some mature trees in the backyard, but was otherwise turf grass. We

immediately set about converting lawn to native wildflowers, shrubs and trees, as well as nonnative fruits, herbs and berries. We removed the boxwoods, smothered grass with cardboard and mulch, and planted a few feet out from the house at first, later adding more than 100 species of wildlife-attracting native plants primarily in our front and side yards. In addition, in 2019 we received a Wild Ones Front Yard Native Plant Make-over from the Wild Ones St Louis Chapter, adding 400 square feet of native plants made up of seven species that have great curb appeal and can withstand drought, heavy rainfall and road salt in the winter.

Children are naturally drawn to animals and a native plant landscape invites all sorts of wildlife. My kids love seeing the many types of



The Coxon kids in the family's native-plant filled front yard that serves as a learning playground.

butterflies that visit blue mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*) and blunt mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), including skippers and zebra swallowtails. Black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) blooms are irresistible to bees in the spring and my kids counted at least four different native bee species on one flower cluster.

Once monarch butterfly eggs hatch, my kids love to search for caterpillars on milkweed and track the length of the insects as they grow bigger with every leaf they devour. And when American toads visit us in the spring, the kids watch as eggs become tadpoles and tadpoles grow into toads. With more toads, come garter, rat and ribbon snakes, and that provides us a great opportunity to discuss the food web. My kids have discovered many other fascinating visitors to our "homegrown national park" including walking sticks, turtles, click beetles, hummingbird moths, deer, rabbits and dragonflies.

In addition to learning about the animals they share the world with, my kids benefit from our native plant landscape as a playground. Shrubs like buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), trees like red oak (*Quercus rubra*) and tall grasses like little

bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) make great hiding places for games of hide-and-seek. Rose mallow (*Hibiscus lasiocarpus*) blooms are a wonderful cake topper on a mud pie. A game of "the lawn is lava" means the kids must balance on decorative rocks, stepping stones and borders, and tiptoe around wildflowers to avoid stepping on grass to win the game. And when we remove spent plants in the spring, cupplants' (*Silphium perfoliatum*) square, long stems make great swords in a battle of woodland defenders. A child's imagination is endless, and a native landscape sets the stage.

Aside from animals, native plants teach us about their reproduction in seeds and dispersal. Rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) seeds fall out of spiked seed heads easily. Blue false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) seed pods sound like a baby's rattle. Southern blue flag (*Iris virginica*) seeds are tightly nestled into an oblong shell. Milkweed (*Asclepias* spp.) seeds fly (when their fluff doesn't stick to your clothes). Birds eat native black raspberries (*Rubus occidentalis*) and disperse their seeds everywhere in their droppings. And you must overcome purple coneflower's

(*Echinacea purpurea*) spikes to get to its seeds.

Supporting the children in your family, neighborhood and community is easy when you plant native species. I often find that fellow nature lovers have a potent, childhood memory that started their love of all things wild. My husband and I wanted to ensure we created opportunities for our kids to make their own nature-loving origin story and we offer that right outside our front door. I've listed a few helpful tips that I've picked up along the way for sharing nature with kids and I hope they help you. If nothing else, go outside and the kids will figure out the rest.

Attract wildlife to your yard.

Start by planting native plants in a highly visible area such as outside your living room window. Native plants provide food and shelter to different birds, bees and butterflies. Decide which animals you'd most like to have as visitors to your yard and that will help you pick a native plant. For example, if you'd like to see monarchs, be sure to plant milkweeds. If you'd like to search for caterpillars in leaf tents, you'll want

Milkweed fluff clings to Coxon's son's ninja outfit as he tries to disperse seeds.





A child finds a spicebush swallowtail caterpillar in its leaf tent.

to plant spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). Lanceleaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) and wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) make seeds that American goldfinches love to eat. Hummingbirds will visit coral honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) and wild sage (*Salvias*) among many other flowering plants.

Learn how to learn more. As you and the children in your life begin to explore the native plants and wildlife that visit them, you may find that the kids ask, “What is that?” At least in the beginning, you may answer, “I don’t know.” A good follow-up statement is, “Let’s find out.” Take a photo, draw what you see, tem-

porarily collect small insects in an animal-friendly catcher to observe them, or record the animal’s sound on your phone (we identified grey treefrogs this way well before we saw one). With this information, you can search in [iNaturalist](#) or other identification apps to determine the name of the animal. Once you have the name, you can search online to learn more.

Follow their curiosity. Children are naturally curious and often find wonder in places adults forget to look. Allow your child to lead the way when exploring the yard. When they have something to show you, go see it. Ask them questions such

as, “Why does it look like that, what does it eat, do you think it’s cute, and what’s its name?” We love to name animals, especially insects that we might fear at first. Cupcake the wolf spider became a beloved, temporary pet and we carefully relocated Sally the shield bug outside after finding her in our kitchen.

Use your senses. At first, my kids’ ears are overwhelmed with the symphony of bird songs, but once they sit quietly in one spot, they eventually find which bird is calling. At night, flashlights help their keen eyes find gray treefrogs camouflaged among the native, aquatic plants in our dragonfly pond. Elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.) blooms draw our noses near, and we wonder if an elderberry perfume already exists or if the kids should invent one. The stems of royal catchfly (*Silene regia*) are sticky to the touch to help protect itself from insects it traps but doesn’t digest like carnivorous plants.

Support their evolving interests. A child’s interest in nature will ebb and flow and evolve as they grow. Insect bingo is a fun game for little kids, but an older child may want something more challenging like plant propagation. When my kids were younger, we made art out of fallen leaves. Now my children are learning about different bee species that visit our yard through a citizen-science bee identification program that I participate in called [Shutterbee](#).

Krystal Coxon, with the help of her husband, has been expanding native plantings in her St. Louis suburban yard to create both wildlife habitat and a playscape for their three children to encourage their exploration of nature. Previously, Krystal worked in environmental protection at the local, state and international levels for a decade. The Coxon family belongs to the Wild Ones St. Louis (Missouri) Chapter.