

Grow Native! program takes root, teaching St. Louisans to plant local

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Jim Winnerman Special to the Post-Dispatch Mar 19, 2025



One of several native plant gardens on South Grand sponsored by the the South Grand Business Improvement District. South Grand Business Improvement District.

Interested in planting something different in your garden this spring? Plants that have been native to Missouri for thousands of years offer an opportunity to add variety to your garden, as well as bringing a host of other benefits to our ecosystem.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Grow Native! program, which has been advocating the planting of native flora, and thriving under the leadership of the Missouri Prairie Foundation.

The effort to increase native plantings in Missouri originated in 1999 when friends Cheryl Riley and Judy Allmon wanted to inspire plant nurseries to include more native plants in their inventory, and to encourage gardeners to include them in their gardens. Their “Bring Nature Home” initiative included education with public workshops, publications and demonstration plantings.

After being sponsored by the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Missouri Department of Agriculture from 2000 through 2011, the program was adopted by the Missouri Prairie Foundation. Today it is thriving through collaboration with consumers, private industry, nonprofit organizations and government agencies, and has significantly increased the demand and use of native plants in Missouri and surrounding states.



A backyard garden of native Missouri plants installed by Pretty City Gardens and Landscapes in St. Louis.

Courtesy Pretty City

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“We incorporated Grow Native! as a program within our organization because it goes hand in hand with our goal to protect and restore original prairie and other native grassland communities in Missouri,” says Carol Davit, executive director of the Missouri Prairie Foundation.

The effort is far more meaningful than just promoting something fun and different to plant in a garden. The benefits of plants native to the Midwest are numerous. First, they provide food and shelter for native wildlife, birds, butterflies and insects.



A hillside spring garden of plants native to Missouri planted by Pretty City Gardens and Landscapes in St. Louis.
Courtesy of Pretty City

Second, due to their extensive root systems, sometimes extending as deep as 15 feet, they decrease erosion and reduce storm water runoff and the risk of flooding. The roots also store carbon, helping mitigate the harmful effects of climate change.

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Third, because plants native to the lower Midwest evolved with the local climate, soils and naturally occurring insects, they are resistant to pests and disease and require no fertilizer or pesticides. Not only does this save landowners and gardeners money, but it contributes to making our environment healthier for people, pollinators, butterflies and songbirds.

Furthermore, and particularly important to gardeners, native plants can supply all the color and variety they desire.

One of many Grow Native! offerings is the Grow Native! Professional Certification Program, which evaluates and certifies landscaping professionals for their native plant knowledge.

An early area business to become certified was Pretty City Gardens and Landscapes in South St. Louis, owned by Cody Hayo.

“When we founded our business in 2014, only about 10 percent of our work involved designing and installing native gardens and educating our clients about the benefits of growing native,” Cody recalls. “Today native plants account for almost all our business. In fact, now many homeowners are so informed they are telling us about information regarding native plants we did not know ourselves.”



The Shaw Nature Reserve Spring Wildflower Market will be May 2-3 this year. Courtesy of Grow Native!

The smallest project for Pretty Gardens has been a 3-foot-by-3-foot garden, and the largest a 5,000 square-foot-native plant installation.

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Hayo says a native plant garden can be as colorful as a formal garden that uses plants not indigenous to the area. “For example, purple and orange coneflowers and black-eyed susan plants are natives,” he says. “A native garden does not have to look like a wild prairie.”

Hayo has also seen a rapidly growing interest in native plants reflected in the education curriculum at St. Louis Community College-Meramec, where he received a Certificate of Horticulture in 2012. “At the time, my courses placed limited emphasis on native plants,” he remembers. “Today those courses are very heavily focused on native plants.”

“The St. Louis area is among the most active in the country planting native plants,” says Marsha Gebhardt, president of the St. Louis chapter of Wild Ones, which is a Grow Native! sponsor. With over 400 members who have native plant gardens, it is one of the largest chapters in the country.

“We are healing the earth one yard at a time,” she says with a smile.

Interest in planting native plants is not limited to private citizens. An example of a local community that has actively participated in growing native plants is the South Grand Business Improvement District, which sponsors native garden plantings along six busy city blocks between Arsenal and Utah streets, and which Hayo maintains.

“Each of the six intersections has up to five compact native gardens,” Hayo reports.

“These plantings demonstrate how native plants can be utilized effectively in an urban environment streetscape, helping to filter pollutants and capture stormwater while also providing habitat for wildlife.”

The gardens of the South Grand Business Improvement District are among several native gardens in throughout Missouri recognized as a “Garden of Excellence” by the Grow Native! program.

Another Grow Native! Landscaping sponsor is the Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District’s Project Clear. An example is an almost two-acre site known as the Old North Rain Garden. According to the MSD website, the native plants in the garden divert approximately 31,000



Volunteers install plants native to Missouri in the front yard of a Landscape Challenge winner in Ballwin. The contest is sponsored by the local chapter of Wild Ones.

Courtesy of Wild Ones

Grow Native! program takes root, teaching St. Louisans to plant local gallons of stormwater from a 1-inch rain away from the area's sewer system, reducing the likelihood of basement backups and sewer overflow while nourishing the plants. "Growing native plants to help pollinators and to assist in the management of stormwater runoff, as well as planting them for their beauty, has grown well beyond plant nerds who collect plants as something of interest," Hayo reflects. "Now people are planting natives for their ecological benefit as well."

For more information

Grow Native! The organization website hosts a plethora of information, including a directory of 180 Grow Native! professional members, native plant nurseries, seed sellers and landscape architects as well as a database of 370 native plants. grownative.org

The Partners for Native Landscaping website links to an abundance of resources dedicated to planting native plants in the St. Louis region. partnersfor nativelandscaping.stlouisaudubon.org

Pretty City Gardens and Landscapes is a Grow Native! professional member that uses native plants to create and maintain local city gardens and landscapes in both public and private settings. prettycitystl.com

Wild Ones is a nationwide community of native plant gardeners. The local chapter, founded in 1998, has an objective of educating and supporting homeowners in learning about and developing native landscapes. For 18 years Wild Ones has also awarded modest grants to nonprofit organizations for landscaping projects incorporating native plants in an educational setting. stlwildones.org

The Metropolitan Sewer District of St. Louis awards small grants for rain gardens using native plants that absorb stormwater and reduce the volume of water flowing into the stormwater sewers. msdprojectclear.org/what-we-do/rainscaping/small-grants/

Missouri Wildflower Nursery grows and sells over 300 wildflower species native to Missouri, as well as native trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, sedges and ferns. mowildflowers.net

If you go

What: Shaw Nature Reserve Wildflower Market

When: 3 to 7 p.m. May 2 and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 3

Where: Shaw Nature Reserve, 307 Pinetum Loop Road, Gray Summit

More info: mobot.org