Neighbors for Native Plants

Growing 13,000+ Native Plants and a Thriving Community in Nashville

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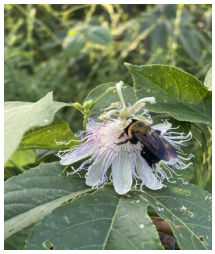
With sharp declines in bird and pollinator populations in recent decades due to habitat loss, light pollution, climate change, and pesticide use (to name a few), recycling my plastics seemed like a drop in the bucket. I felt deflated about the impact any one of us can truly have in protecting our beautiful world and its fascinating creatures.

That all changed in the fall of 2022 when a good friend mentioned I might enjoy reading "Nature's Best Hope" by Doug Tallamy. Two hundred fifty-six highly informative, hope-giving, and easily digestible pages later, life felt new and inspired. I was buzzing with excitement about the fact that each of us could help build life-supporting ecosystems in our backyards by planting plants native to our region, effectively building what Dr. Tallamy calls a "Homegrown National Park."



In any given area, native plants have co-evolved with local insects for thousands of years. While each plant contains specific hard-to-digest and sometimes even toxic chemical compounds to keep its leaves from getting eaten, local insect species have adapted over time to digest the leaves of specific native plants. A plant is called a "host plant" for an insect if this insect can digest its leaves and, therefore, lays eggs on it. Without native plants in their area, pollinators must fly further to find appropriate places to lay their eggs, sometimes to their demise. Pollinators are an essential part of our web of life as they feed all kinds of wildlife (e.g., birds, amphibians, reptiles, and many mammals). In addition, since pollination is essential for the reproduction of most plants, insects are key in ensuring that we can grow enough plants to feed ourselves (and, of course, continue to breathe oxygen).

Native plants are important in all layers of the landscape, from trees (did you know oaks are a host plant to more than 400 insect species?) to shrubs, flowers, and groundcovers. For example, many caterpillars drop themselves from trees once they are ready for their next developmental stage, and the presence of a lower layer of native plants around the base of trees is key to soften this fall and provide shelter from predators. Most North American native plants have deep roots, which help direct rainwater into the ground and prevent runoff and flooding. These plants also help protect native trees by keeping their roots cooler (through shade and their moisture-retaining roots). Furthermore, many native grasses store carbon underground in their extensive root system, making it less likely to be released back into the atmosphere when they die than

carbon stored above ground in woody plants. Finally, native plants have adapted to local growing conditions, which means they are low maintenance once established and often have a more extended growing season, resulting in more time spent sequestering carbon and providing key sources of nectar for pollinators.

The knowledge Doug Tallamy communicated in his book felt so important that I wanted to share it with everyone who would listen. Serendipitously, a dear friend (Laura Wallace - the person in the middle in the picture) connected me with someone else who could not stop talking about native plants. Bethany Crandell (the person on the right in the picture) and I hit it off right away through our mutual passion for native plants and desire to find a way to make it easy for busy families (like ours) to get regionally-suited native plants in their yards. So, in the spring of 2023, Bethany and I researched which plants were appropriate for our region (Nashville, TN) and created native plant pollinator kits for anyone interested. Our efforts got approximately 600 native plants to 46 families, mostly friends and family.

Bitten by the bug, we hoped to get the word out to more folks for our fall sale. So, we got on social media, created a website, made some appearances on the local news, and received a regional grant to donate a native shrub to each family who got a pollinator kit. When 220 families ordered approximately 4,000 plants that fall, we were very excited and "in over our heads." My screened porch, which we used to store the plants to protect them from the many neighborhood deer, was covered entirely with native plants, and many completed pollinator kits ended up all over my dining room. At the end of our second sale, we knew some logistical changes were needed to keep going and growing.

So, we regrouped, connected with our local park, and found an entire community of enthusiasts to help us streamline our process. The excitement among our neighbors and especially our volunteers was palpable and further fueled our passion for native plants and community building around this important mission. By the end of 2024, a total of 13,500 native plants were brought to the Nashville area (including local parks and neighborhood community gardens) that were not there before we read Dr. Tallamy's book. I hope sharing our story inspires others to do the same in their communities. Together, we really can make a difference, connecting residential yards, expanding the ecological footprint of existing natural areas, creating pollinator pathways, and restoring habitats, one yard at a time.