



Austin Homegrown Parks

Version 1.0

Welcome to the Austin Homegrown Parks project, a community action based initiative focused on incorporating rewilded landscapes and wildlife habitat into urban and neighborhood areas through home landscaping. Planting natives is more sustainable than traditional landscaping, requires less water and care, and supports native pollinators and birds. To learn more about the Homegrown National Park project that inspired this guide, [click here](#).

This guide was created to make wildscaping and gardening with natives easily accessible to all, by creating a list of simple steps and tips to follow and compiling resources for further research. The guide outlines five steps to create a native planting in your yard, with tips, examples, and explanations along the way. Resources that can provide you with more in-depth guidance and information are linked throughout, and you can also find a complete collection of them on the last page of the document. You can rely on the guide as much --or as little-- as you want.



Step One: Taking inventory

Make a list of the plants you already have growing in your yard! Research to find out which ones are native and which ones are introduced or invasive. Take inventory of the kinds of beds you have in your yard as well. Are they mostly shady, or sunny? You can print out a map of your property from google earth and label the sunny and shady parts. This will help you choose the plants that will do best in your yard and figure out where to plant them.

Species to watch out for

Many common garden ornamentals are extremely invasive, and can cause extensive harm to ecosystems and the wildlife they support. These are species you should avoid at all cost and remove if you find them on your property. Remember that these are only three of the most commonly planted invasives, there are many more. Make sure to check that the other plants in your yard are not invasive in your area. [Here](#) is a more extensive list of invasives.



01 Nandina

Nandina, also called "heavenly bamboo" is identifiable by its sharply pointed leaves, which grow in pairs opposite each other and may be tinged in red. It typically grows 4-8 feet tall. It has bright red berries in the fall, which are packed with cyanide and highly toxic to any animal, bird, or human that tries to eat them. Due to its popularity as an ornamental shrub and highly invasive tendencies, nandina is very wide spread. It is also extremely difficult to remove.

Privets and Ligustrums 02

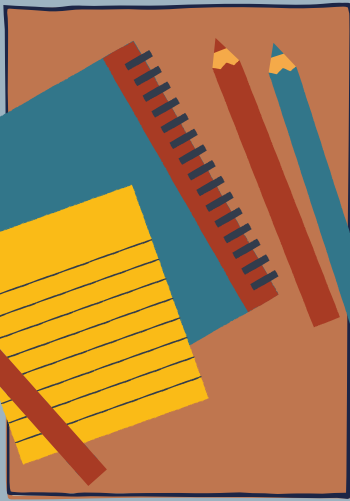
Many varieties of privet are invasive in Texas, including the glossy privet, wax-leaf ligustrum, and Chinese privet. Unlike nandina, the berries privets produce are not toxic to birds-- because they are high in sugar, birds prefer these berries over those of native trees, which means they don't consume the correct nutrients to give them the sustained energy they need during migration. Additionally, the birds spread the privet seeds everywhere, which makes it extremely hard to contain this species. They've come to dominate both neighborhoods and urban greenbelt.



03 Chinaberry

Chinaberry trees are another invasive asian ornamental. They're fast growing deciduous trees that drop hundreds of yellow berries the size of small marbles. Not only are the berries poisonous, they also have a distinct and unpleasant smell. Chinaberry trees have weak wood and shallow root systems and often drop branches or fall in storms, however they are extremely resilient and will usually sprout again and again if cut down.





Step Two: Making a Plan

Now that you've documented the species in your yard, make decisions about what you want to keep, and what needs to be removed. Plan to remove invasive species if possible, and keep native ones. Then you'll need to choose new plants to add to your yard, and decide where they'll be planted. In order to create a functioning ecosystem, minimize areas of turf grass which will require a lot of water and won't support birds and insects. Native gardens are not only more environmentally friendly than lawns, they also cost less to maintain and need less watering and care.

Choosing Your Plants

There are many native plant choices out there, these three are certainly not the only choices! You can use the [Native Plant Finder](#) to search for native plants in your zip code. You can also do research on what plants and habitat used to exist in your ecoregion--Austin lies in the Blackland Prairie ecoregion, one of the most threatened ecosystems in North America. Look for plants that fill different layers of vegetation, some grasses and flowers, some shrubs, and some trees. Layering vegetation like this will create a habitat that mimics natural ecosystems and is much more productive than a one-layer landscape. Find a longer list of important plants native to the blackland prairies [here](#).



01 Oak

Oak trees are a keystone species, meaning that they are an extremely productive part the ecosystem, supporting many different species of wildlife. Oaks host 468 different species of caterpillar, all of which are important sources of food for birds and often become important pollinators in an ecosystem. If you don't have an oak tree in your yard, consider adding one. They require little water and can live for over a hundred years.

02 Goldenrod

Goldenrod hosts 82 species of caterpillar, as well as providing nectar and pollen for various species of bees and butterflies. It has beautiful sprays of golden flowers in late summer. It does best in full sun, and is extremely drought tolerant, requiring little to no extra watering. There are many varieties of goldenrod, so if you decide to plant it, make sure to choose one that it native to your area.



03 Big Bluestem

Big Bluestem is a grass that once dominated the blackland prairie. It's essential to many prairie ecosystems and provides excellent wildlife habitat, as well as aiding in reducing soil erosion. It grows best in full sun, and requires little water once established. I suggest researching exactly how and when to plant it if you decide on adding it to your wildscape, as it is usually sold in seed form. Native wildflowers are also important to the blackland prairie! You can find a list of some of them [here](#).

IMPORTANT: When many people think of planting for pollinators, they think about milkweed for the monarch butterflies. If you decide to plant milkweed in your garden, make sure that you are planting native varieties instead of the tropical strain! Tropical milkweed survives year round, allowing it to host deadly parasites that are harmful to the monarch butterflies. Read more [here](#).

Pocket Prairies

Pocket prairies are plantings of natives that take up unused spaces in your yard, even small groups of plantings can provide invaluable resources to pollinators and other insects. [Here](#) is an excellent guide for creating your own pocket prairie!

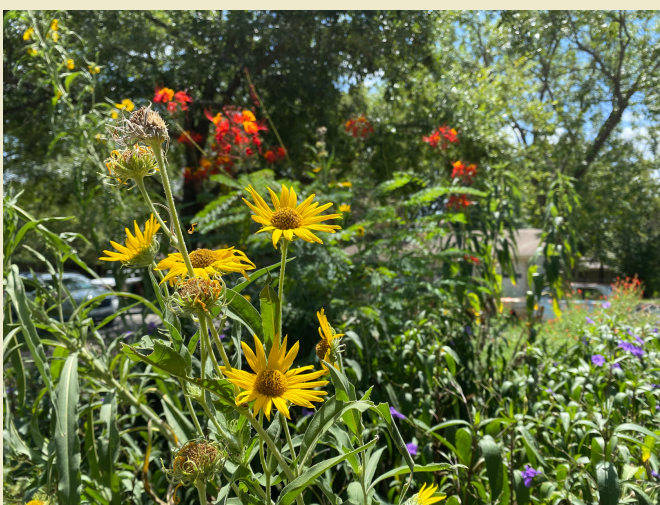


Photo courtesy of Sarah Larocca

Minimizing the Lawn

Lawns are both costly and ecologically inificiant, requiring far more water and maintenance than native plantings while providing less habitat for wildlife and sequestering less carbon. Try to minimize the area of your yard covered by turfgrass, and consider replacing large expanses of lawn with narrower paths between native plantings.

Tip: Consider reserving a portion of your yard for seasonal wildflowers, or scattering their seeds throughout perennial plantings. If you choose kinds that bloom in different seasons you can enjoy their colors for most of the year. Find a list of wildflowers native to the blackland prairies [here](#).

Running Water

Consider adding a freshwater bubbler or fountain to your yard, to provide a place for migrating and resident birds and wildlife to rest and drink. The sound of running water is irresistible to birds, and will encourage them to visit your yard again and again. As long as your water source is not stagnant, you don't have to worry about it breeding mosquitoes. Make sure not to add chlorine or other chemical treatments to your fountain, as they are harmful to the birds and wildlife that drink the water.





Step Three: Executing your plan

With everything planned out, you're ready to start planting! You'll need to find a nursery that carries the plants you've chosen, and you may have to plant some as seeds. Before you start planting, make sure you've done any landscaping you want to do. You may want to install a pond or fountain or prepare a new bed, or make other changes to the hardscape. Many people favor a drip irrigation system for their wildscapes, which saves water, but of course this is optional.

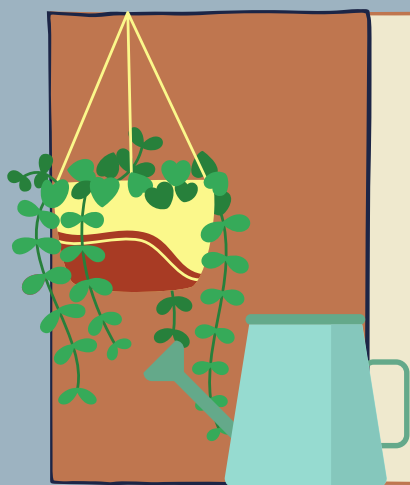
Planting in Thickets

While it's important to leave your plants room to grow, planting vegetation in big clumps, with many different kinds of plants growing around each other, provides great habitat for birds, caterpillars, and bees. In nature, trees often grow in groves, with their roots interlocking to share resources and provide them with extra stability. Planting in neat rows with a couple of feet of bare mulch in-between plants may look neater, but it means you will end up with fewer flowers in your garden, which provide less food, and less shelter, and are therefore much less hospitable to wildlife.



Photo courtesy of Sarah Larocca

Tip: Look up the time of year when your chosen plants should be planted, especially if you are planting from seed.



Step Four: Finishing up and Maintenance

The good news is, once you've established your plantings, native gardens are very easy to maintain! In fact, it's best to keep pruning to a minimum resist the urge to clean up the leaf litter and fallen branches that collect around your plantings, as it provides habitat for pollinators and insects that are important sources of food for birds.

Finishing Your Landscape

Here are some things you can do to encourage wildlife to take up residence in your yard and provide the resources they need to thrive there!



01 Caterpillar Pupation Sites

Leave leaf litter in some of your garden beds, especially under trees, to allow caterpillars somewhere to pupate once they leave their host plant. Placing a few rotting tree stumps, logs, or branches in your beds will also provide valuable habitat for insect that burrow into wood to pupate. Using large decorative rocks in your garden will help create habitat where caterpillars and other insects can hide.

What to Avoid 02

Fertilizing your garden encourages the growth of invasives that favor more nitrogen rich soils, while american natives tend to thrive best in the unaltered soils they are already adapted to. Fertilizers are also harmful to aquatic ecosystems, which they enter as runoff, so try to avoid using them in your garden. Another thing to avoid is mosquito fogging systems, which are harmful to all insects, not just mosquitoes. Lastly, keep pruning to a minimum, as many important insects nest or hibernate in the hollow stems of plants.



03 Bee and Bird Houses

You can add birdhouses and bee hotels to your yard to convince wildlife to move in and provide them places to stay. If you add bee houses to your yard, it is better to add several small ones than one large one, as a single large bee house could be targeted by predators or ravaged by disease.

Resource Directory

Below is a collection of links to resources that can help you choose your plants, design your landscape, and give you further guidance and information.

[Homegrown National Park Project Home Page](#)

This is the link to Doug Tallamy's website, which has information about the concept that inspired this project, and tons of helpful resources. Once you've finished your native plantings, head to [this page](#) to get on the Homegrown National Parks map!

[Pollinator Planting Guide by Zip Code](#)

This is a helpful resource that will tell you your ecoregion and give you broad guidance on what you should plant.

[Native Texas Tree Planting and Care Guide](#)

A resource on choosing, planting, and caring for native Texas trees.

[Native Plant Finder](#)

A wonderful resource for finding native flowers, shrubs, and trees based on the number of beneficial insects they support. You can also use it to check whether plants in your yard are native to your zip code.

[Audubon Native Plants Database](#)

Extensive and easy to navigate native plant recommendations based on zip code. Includes planting requirements for each entry, photos, and a list of the birds attracted to the plant.

[Treefolks Website](#)

A nonprofit that offers free native and adapted trees.

[Texas Wildscapes Certification](#)

The Texas Wildscapes program runs on a similar principle to the Homegrown National Park, check out their [tips and requirements](#) as guidelines if you're feeling lost, or look into applying for the certification. They also have helpful native plant guides for the [blackland prairie](#) and [edwards plateau](#) ecoregions.

[Texas Invasives List](#)

A comprehensive list of some of the most invasive plants in Texas.

[Make a Pocket Prairie](#)

A guide from the Wildflower Center that will walk you through the steps of creating a bit of native prairie in your own yard.

Credits

This guide was created by Juliette Mader with support from the rest of the Austin Youth Forest Council team, and was inspired by Douglas Tallamy's book, "Nature's Best Hope." With special thanks to: Jasmine Herrera, Britney Huynh, Emily King, and Ashleigh Cibelli-Pettus from the Youth Forest Council staff, as well as Karen Kocher, Sarah Larocca, and Monica Flores for their wonderful guidance and advice.