

Acadiana Lifestyles



Going Native

Native Plant Project seeks to save habitat, one garden at a time

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If Phyllis Griffard had her way, everyone would have a some tickseed growing in their Lafayette yards. The plant's homely-sounding name and unprepossessing appearance belie its actual importance in the grand scheme of things.

"The goal is a connected habitat, to create a corridor," said Griffard, a master instructor in biology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and president of the Native Plant Project. "The way we manage our own landscapes makes a difference for wildlife, insects and migratory birds. Louisiana is part of a major flyway. If you have hospitable grounds, they recover more quickly."

"The tiny pieces of habitat you create are significant."

Born three years ago when she and several associates heard a lecture by Delaware professor Douglas Tallamy at LSU, the Native Plant Project now has 50 regular members and a mailing list of 260, all dedicated to the propagation of native plants and educating others on their use in local landscaping.

"People came back so jazzed," said Heather Finley, vice-president of the Project. "Tallamy had several books out, including *Bringing Nature Home*. Our mission is to promote the use of native plants in our community."

"We consider it our job," said Griffard.

Tallamy's premise is a sobering one. Unprecedented development, human population growth, paved roads, and millions of acres of lawn have taken their toll on biodiversity. We are all interdependent — all species depend on one another, and to remove one from the chain affects those at the top. Humans, in many cases, have destroyed the habitat necessary for plants and animals to reproduce.

The Native Plant Project aims to cor-

rect the imbalance, one tickseed at a time.

"What we're trying to do is create a demand. If plant nurseries don't know, they don't stock [native plants]," said Griffard.

Homeowners needn't own a meadow or a prairie to do their part. Native plants can fit into a suburban garden or more manicured landscaping. Finley moved into a residence on the river and was originally interested in plants that could survive flooding. "That's going to be natives," she said.

The group stresses that most property owners probably have some already. Plants considered natives are sages, Echinacea, coreopsis, mountain mint, blue mistflower, salvias, white bee balm and purple coneflower, to name just a few. Not all native plants are herbaceous. Oak trees are home to over 500 species of butterflies and moths, whose caterpillars provide food for birds. According to ecologists, non-natives support 29 times less biodiversity.

The organization maintains demonstration gardens at Acadian Village, and a rain garden at Vermilionville as examples and inspiration. It recently inherited a greenhouse in Arnaudville.

"We fund ourselves through sales of plants, donations, and grants. It all adds up," said Griffard.

Native Plant Project secretary and biologist Kari Cretini brings her mission via school outreach. "Broadmoor's an old subdivision, we still have owls," said Cretini. "If you have lizards and small mammals, predators — it's a sign it's doing fine." Cretini is planning a seed ball project she intends to introduce to students at Broadmoor Elementary.

There's also discussion of offering an adult education class, *Native Plants 101*.

"They've been together for millennia," said Griffard. "The key is having them in your landscape. You don't have to have all natives, you don't have to start over."

"The first step is to plant one thing."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

ABOVE: Ecologist Larry Allain leads a tour of the wetland and prairie plants on the UL campus and speaks about insects and their role in our ecosystems.

LEFT: Native plants can be incorporated into any garden. Shown are tickseed, white bee balm, purple cone flower, sage and blue mistflower.