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Going the extra yard: Americans have begun using less water and fewer chemicals to transform cookie-cutter lawns into wildlife-friendly havens. Three habitat heroes in Tampa, San Antonio, and Seattle show the way. (Healthy Neighborhoods).

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BARBECUES AND PICNICS, FREEZE TAG AND laughter. The yard is a place where neighbors gather, kids play, and pets frolic. It's where you go to read on a warm afternoon, or catch fireflies in the cool of the evening. The first piece of nature as you walk out your door. Or is it?

Yards have long been considered places where wilderness is not so much cultivated as tamed. Places of gadgets and gizmos--sprinklers, sprayers, seeders, shears. With Japanese beetles to be fought and dandelions to stifle, products like Weed-a-Bomb and the Flame Gun soon filled out the arsenal. Pre-made lawns could be bought and unfurled like sheets on a bed of suburbia, and mowed without even having to set foot on the ground.

Advertisements whetted Americans' appetites for golf-course-like greens. Scotts Weedfree Seed and Turf Builder in 1944 promised a "carpet of sparkling green turf [that] will be the pride of the family and the envy of

the neighborhood." In 1959 the Porter-Cable Machine Co. encouraged buyers to hop on its Yard Master mower and "watch the crowds gather. "To many, lawns represented status that could be sowed. Today they cover more U.S. land--25 million acres--than any single crop.

"They have proven to be a very expensive ecologic and economic symbol," points out Bret Rappaport, the director of Wild Ones, a nonprofit that encourages landscaping with native plants as an alternative to the vast swaths of monoculture widespread today. "An exotic landscape requires life support," he says. "One has to alter the environment for it to survive. And life support isn't cheap--it requires pesticides, fertilizers, and water." In fact, a typical U.S. lawn, a third of an acre, receives up to 10 pounds of pesticides, 20 pounds of fertilizer, and 170,000 gallons of water annually. What's more, in a year a homeowner could spend the equivalent of a 40-hour workweek simply mowing that lawn (producing pollution equal to that created by driving a car 14,000 miles) and hundreds of dollars on its care.

Natural landscaping, on the other hand, harmonizes a yard's plant life with the greater ecological community--the species already adapted to the local climate--while eliminating the need for costly maintenance. Whereas nitrogen and phosphorous fertilizers, along with chemical herbicides and pesticides, easily run off conventional lawns and into water sources, the varying root lengths of native plants actually reduce non-point-source pollution by anchoring soil and absorbing water. Natives also attract a variety of local wildlife, and provide respite for millions of migrating birds that, in turn, disperse seeds, pollinate plants, and keep insect populations in check.

"Anybody can do this in their own backyard," says Diana Balmori, coauthor of *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*. "It's not rocket science." Start by reducing the amount of lawn itself, she suggests, and replace it with a more diverse plant community. Then layer what you plant, since

different heights provide shelter for different insects and birds. Whenever possible, use grasses and plants that are native and thus adept at growing in areas that are boggy, steep, or exposed. This vegetation should need no more water than the region provides.

You can feed grassy areas by mixing the seeds with clover, which as it's cut becomes a natural source of nitrogen, or by applying organic fertilizers such as lawn clippings and compost. "All of these things are common sense, and can be found in the same nursery that's pushing monoculture," Balmori says.

"People want to make a difference at home, in the communities where they live," says Noel Gerson, vice-president of **Audubon** At Home, a national program that was recently launched to support this transformation. "And they want the information to do that."

Like the people profiled in the following pages, residents of Tampa, San Antonio, and Seattle don't have to look far to find hands anxious to help them on the path to a healthier yard. **Audubon** chapters in these cities spread the message of natural landscaping through programs that teach the nuts and bolts of conserving water, cutting down on chemical use, and providing wildlife habitat. While more examples exist, these three prove that--wherever you live--conservation can be easy, and can be accomplished one yard at a time.

WASTING NO WATER

1. "LET'S GO GET RID OF SOME grass," says Charner Reese, grabbing a hoe and marching toward a lawn that should be wilting with fright. Her sacrilege is taking place in a Florida suburb where most folks worship--and water--their lawns. Reese, an environmental planner, and her husband, Tom, an environmental lawyer, are different from their neighbors. During the past decade they have removed their greedy lawn inch by inch and replaced it with native vegetation that's far less thirsty and much kinder to wildlife.

Pines, palmettos, cypresses, Chickasaw plums, and cabbage palms are slowly taking over their Tampa yard. Under the trees is a riot of wildflower pinks, reds, and yellows. A green tree frog watches near the American beauty berry; a mockingbird sings from the red cedar. Yes, those are flamingos perched beneath the magnolia. They're plastic, of course. The Reeses may dislike traditional landscapes, but they are Floridians, after all.

And, like most Floridians, they know how to push a lawn mower. They are simply loath to do it. "My vision for my yard is not to have any lawn at all," says Charner, who moved to Florida as a child and received a master's degree in botany from the University of Florida in 1979. It's not unfair to call her an earth mother, with her skin brown from the sun and her arms and back strong from toting bags of wood chips. She flinches when she hears her neighbors' leaf blowers.

"When my lawn turns brown I do nothing," she says. "When it rains again it usually turns green. But if it doesn't, I just get rid of it and plant a native." She swings her hoe again and executes a small patch of St. Augustine, the found-in-every-yard grass species known for its appetite for water and pesticides.

Years ago the Reeses would have been declared un-American. In fact, Tom Reese once defended a homeowner who defied a landscape ordinance in coastal Florida by refusing to have a real lawn. Tom managed to keep the man from becoming a scofflaw, and the ordinance became extinct. But the dark ages haven't entirely disappeared. In the drought-plagued Tampa region, the average citizen uses 132 gallons of water a day--about half of it in the yard. The Southwest Florida Water Management District now encourages area residents to replace grass with native vegetation, and Tampa's **Audubon** chapter conducts "healthy habitat" monthly seminars to help homeowners learn how.

"It's like fighting the American Dream," says Ged Caddick, president of Tampa **Audubon**, who points out

that many local communities are still deed-restricted, which means residents are required to maintain that perfect field of green. "But examples like the Reeses," he says, "show that a yard that doesn't require a lot of water or chemicals can look nice, that it can be aesthetically pleasing and easy to maintain."

"It was pretty easy," Charner Reese agrees. First she and Tom made a diagram of their yard. Then they decided what they wanted to plant and headed for a nursery that sells only Florida natives. Although over the years the Reeses have spent about \$400 on nearly three dozen plant species, they're sure they have more than paid for their new landscaping with a lower water bill.

"We don't even have a sprinkler," Charner says. She waters only by hand and only after she has put a new plant into the ground. Once a native is established, she says, it usually does fine. Even her grass thrives. Of course, her new variety, muhly grass, is a native. "I found a baby black snake under a patch of it," says Charner, who values snakes so much she even tossed a rubber serpent in a hedge for good luck.

Alas, the workman who arrived to fix an awning must have been startled. He chopped off the rubber snake's head. After the Reeses teach their city to value native landscaping, perhaps they can mount a public relations campaign on behalf of snakes.

JEFF KLINKENBERG is the author of two essay collections on Florida history and culture.

CUTTING OUT CHEMICALS

2. BLAZE-ORANGE BUTTERFLIES tilt lazily in the sun. A fall breeze gently floats tendrils of passion vine that drape through tangled limbs. A path of crushed pink granite beckons the eye toward the garden gate. Can this really be the land of the vaqueros, dust storms, and tumbleweeds that have come to characterize San Antonio? This verdant yard belies the drought and the

intense heat waves that afflict the city.

It should be no surprise that this Texas haven is thriving while, nearby, vast lawns punctuated by islands of exotic flowers--the standard in this region's and environment--are browning. Such manicured landscapes aren't easy to fuel, even with the water, fertilizers, and pesticides that local homeowners apply generously, and often futilely, to their properties. In 1996, when plans to landscape their own home fell squarely in the middle of a devastating drought, San Antonio natives Marjie and Henry Christopher began designing a way out of this unhealthy cycle.

Their solution, nestled in an upscale suburban neighborhood, incorporates all the elements of good wildlife habitat--stands of native plants as well as a pond with shallow areas provide food and shelter for birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians--but uses none of the harsh chemicals that have become the hallmark of "traditional" landscaping. "We rarely water our gardens," Marjie explains in a delicate Texas drawl, "and we don't use any chemical fertilizers or pesticides either." To survive, native species require little or nothing in the way of supplements, she explains, which helps to avoid contaminating both the underground aquifer that supplies the city's drinking water, and the visitors, both human and animal, that frequent the yard.

"The neighbors first thought we were crazy to protect the native mulberries, hackberries, and flame-leaf sumacs from the bulldozer during the building of our home," says Marjie, a vibrant grandmother. "But the birds love them!" Monarchs, too, fill the air during their migration. Cottontail rabbits delight the Christophers' grandchildren--all nine of them. A horned lizard has been spotted peeking cautiously out from behind the rocks. In the spring, purple martins swoop and swirl in feeding frenzies. "Dragonflies are everywhere," Marjie says, "and they're so good about eating the mosquitoes."

Marjie is convinced that none of this would be possible if she and her husband used harsh chemical pesticides.

"Hummingbirds need the little mites they find in flowers," she says, "and songbirds have to have insect protein when they feed their nestlings in the summer." All native insects, from the lovely butterflies to the lowly aphids, are subject to natural predators, but Marjie has yet to experience a plague of any particular species. And as for a safer fertilizer? "A little fish emulsion goes a long way," she says, her hazel eyes twinkling.

The Christophers' yard is a place of harmony, where humans work with nature instead of against it. Now neighbors who once scoffed ask for their advice, which Marjie, a member of the Bexar Audubon Society and a volunteer with the Texas Master Naturalists, is eager to give. "She knows her plants well and has learned quite a bit about environmentally friendly pest control," affirms Patty Leslie Pasztor of Bexar Audubon, who plans to include a stop at the Christopher yard in a spring wildscaping workshop the chapter is staging. "Marjie is really willing to share her garden and knowledge with others."

That becomes obvious with one look at her landscaping, which spills out onto the utility easement adjacent to the backyard. The area has become a place where neighborhood adults gather to talk and trade plant cuttings and seeds, and where neighborhood children play among the shrubs, grasses, and flowers. Though her own roots are planted firmly in the Texas soil, Marjie looks across her homemade Eden and sighs, "It's like being a million miles away."

KELLY BENDER, a wildlife biologist, recently coauthored a book on gardening for wildlife.

WOOING THE WILDLIFE

3. IT'S EASY TO MISS DON Norman's driveway on a quiet street in northern Seattle. It seems to disappear into a lush landscape of cedar, vine maple, and snowberry. Follow it past a tall stand of Pacific wax myrtle, its leafy branches swaying with the movement of seed-gobbling

warblers, and you'll come to an opening in the trees, where Norman's modest house sits next to a manmade pond ringed by ferns. Nearby, a downy woodpecker drums against a Douglas fir snag that is riddled with ragged holes--the nesting sites of northern flickers and chickadees.

Standing quietly in the clearing, Norman slips binoculars over an unruly thatch of brown hair. He is watching a golden-crowned sparrow peck at leaf litter. As a wildlife toxicologist who bands and studies migratory birds, he has seen this individual before. "This bird is trap-happy," he says. "I've caught and examined it several times in the past week, and it's definitely gaining weight for winter."

Other bird sightings on his half-acre lot practically leap off the pages of his carefully kept notebook: a ruby-crowned kinglet that spent the winter, three fox sparrows that made their debut this year. Then there was the Costa's hummingbird--the second ever sighted in Washington--that found the yellow blooms on Norman's broccoli so appealing that it stayed for two weeks, attracting a steady stream of local birders. More than 70 species of birds have landed in his yard since he began his tally in 1980.

Norman, a member of Seattle [Audubon's](#) Conservation Committee, opens up his yard to other visitors, too--anyone interested in the chapter's Gardening for Life program who wants to see the concept in action. "Don accepts that it takes time to transform a yard into real habitat," says Lauren Braden, program director. "It's easy to get overwhelmed by the idea, but there are very simple things that will make a yard more friendly and healthy to wildlife."

"The part of Gardening for Life that really hit home with me was the idea of leaving things alone--not cleaning up in fall, not trying to have a perfect yard," says Norman. He leaves piles of brush and garden clippings for Bewick's wrens to pick over in winter, as well as a swath of uncut grass where towhees can forage undisturbed.

The seeds of overwintering mustards are so enthusiastically devoured by finches and siskins that he now plants extra mustard.

Norman didn't always visualize his yard as one seamless wildlife habitat. When he moved in two decades ago, he was faced by an overgrown tangle of Himalayan blackberry and holly. He planned a landscape of varied uses: an organic vegetable garden with fruit trees and vines, and a wildlife garden of native trees and shrubs. But as he continues to work his way around the property, removing invasives and planting anew, he discovers a rich intermingling of the two gardens.

The vegetable and herb section is sunny and open, and many birds, like that Costa's hummingbird, find it irresistible. Flocks of bushtits, working over a lanky fennel plant for insects, make room for an Anna's hummingbird as it perches briefly on its way to the porch feeder. A border of serviceberry provides shelter and early fruit for robins and waxwings, which make forays into the garden for insects. Along the garden's perimeter, Norman is planting more native shrubs, such as snowberry and red-flowering currant, to extend the wildlife space. In a recently cleared spot, he extends the food garden by adding raspberry canes.

And if a few of Norman's berries make a meal for a flicker? Given the rewards of habitat gardening, he is more than willing to share.

CLAIRE HAGEN DOLE was the publisher of Butterfly Gardeners' Quarterly for seven years.

Don Norman gathers grapes from his arbor (opposite), but the most avid eaters of this locally cultivated variety are the robins, waxwings, and flickers that frequent his yard. A grapevine also provides an ideal foraging area for birds like wrens, white-crowned sparrows, bushtits, and chickadees.

If you'd like a copy of the "[Audubon](#) Guide for a

Healthy Yard and Beyond," or if you have a natural landscaping story to share, contact **Audubon At Home** at 215-355-9588 or by e-mailing audubonathome@audubon.org.

For information about landscaping with natives, contact Wild Ones, which was started in 1980 and now educates its 3,000 members through 40 local chapters, a handbook, and a national publication. Call Wild Ones at 877-394-9453, or go to www.for-wild.org.

Charner Reese (opposite) uses liriopse as a hardy ground cover (bottom right) in place of a water-thirsty grass lawn. Supplementing with native species like the saw palmetto, which grows up around a slash pine (top right), and the muhly grass at the base of a Chickasaw plum (bottom left) will also be less energy-intensive while imparting a regional look. If you're wondering where to buy native plants in the Tampa area, the local **Audubon** chapter serves as a clearinghouse of materials on how to break the St. Augustine grass habit. Contact Tampa **Audubon** at 813-983-0258, or e-mail tampa.audubon@verizon.net.

Cosmos (opposite, top left), while native to Mexico, is particularly drought- and pest-resistant. The Jerusalem thorn (top right) is native to Texas, making it a natural fit for Marjie Christopher's yard, as is the mountain sage (bottom left), which blooms in the late fall, providing valuable fuel for migrating hummingbirds. To learn how to "wildscape" in the San Antonio area, inquire about Bexar **Audubon** Society workshops, which include tours of successfully landscaped yards. Contact Bexar **Audubon** at 210-822-4503, or visit www.bexaraudubon.org.

Don Norman (opposite) has watched many a contented waxwing feast on the native serviceberry along the back of his garden (top right). The Bosc pear tree, which Norman planted for his own snacking, is a variety adapted to the local climate, so besides being pest-resistant, it rarely loses fruit to a late cold snap. The white snowberry (bottom left) provides great nesting for

native species and requires very little maintenance. Just ask Seattle **Audubon** for a copy of a booklet full of other regional tips, or if you'd like a Gardening for Life workshop brought to your Seattle neighborhood. Contact Seattle **Audubon** at 206-523-8243, extension 14, or e-mail laurenb @seattleaudubon.org.

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