Embracing Nature with
NATIVE PLANT ORDINANCES

Terry A. Wolfer and Sarah Roberts

IN THE CONTINENTAL U.S....

• Lawns cover 40,000,000 acres in the US, including almost 50% of total green space in cities (Sachs, 2020)
• “From coast to coast, our cities and suburbs have become more similar to each other than to the very different natural habitats they’ve replaced” (Susannah Lerman, U.S. Forest Service ecologist)
• As a result, 1/3 of wildlife at risk of extinction in upcoming decades
NATIVE PLANT ORDINANCES

• Cities and HOAs often enforce conventional landscapes: mowed lawns without weeds or unruly plants
• Most of these landscapes feature non-native plants, which greatly decrease local biodiversity
• Native Plant Ordinances can promote the use of native plants in landscaping to increase local biodiversity and reverse the wildlife crisis in the US

NATIVE PLANTS PROMOTE...

01 Biodiversity Preservation

Native plants provide essential habitat and food sources for native wildlife, contributing to overall biodiversity conservation.

02 Water Conservation

Native plants require less water because they are well-adapted to the local climate.

03 Improved Soil Health

Native plant roots stabilize soil which decreases erosion.
NATIVE PLANTS PROMOTE...

04 Invasive Species Management
Non-native plants may outcompete indigenous vegetation and disrupt local ecosystems.

05 Long-term Sustainability
Using native plants in landscaping promotes long-term sustainability of the region's ecosystems and natural resources.

06 Outreach Opportunities
Education about the importance of native plants, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable landscaping practices.

OPPOSITION TO NATIVE PLANTINGS

Concerns about aesthetics/uniformity
Communities may strive for a uniform look with manicured lawns and ornamental plants. Native plantings may not align with uniformity or the community aesthetic.

Concerns about maintenance/weed control
Without proper education, communities may be concerned with the potential of weed invasion. In reality, native plants or landscaping require less maintenance after establishment.

Perceived property value impact
Homeowners may fear property values will decrease due to the wild or unkempt look of native wildlife-friendly gardens.

Misconceptions about wildlife
Some people fear that wildlife-friendly gardens will attract pests or dangerous animals like snakes or rodents.
“Cues to Care”

“Novel landscape designs that improve ecological quality may not be appreciated or maintained if recognizable landscape language that communicates human intention is not part of the landscape” (Nassauer, 1995, p. 161).

01 Clear boundaries
02 Mow edges
03 Human elements
04 Plant in drifts
Create pathways
Signage
1415 Victoria Street (Cottontown)
Designing an HOA-Approved Garden

01
Know the rules
Research your HOA (or city) landscape guidelines.

02
Present ideas for approval
Present your design at a board meeting for approval.

03
Be neighborly
Maintain your yard, pull weeds, keep mulch fresh. If neighbors have questions or concerns, kindly educate them on the benefits of a pollinator garden.
Designing an HOA-Approved Garden

04
Start small and expand slowly
Slowly introduce different plants to ease neighbors into a non-conventional garden and to help you and the community get used to a wildlife-friendly landscape.

05
Group plants
Group plants in odd numbers, create masses, and limit the number blooming at any one time.

06
Pay attention to height
Plants less than 3-4 feet are less imposing, less than 2 feet and 1-2 feet away from sidewalks.

07
Let the garden sit before expanding
Allow yourself time to become familiar with plant behavior and for neighbors to embrace the view.
How to Respond to the “Weed Police”

01
Don’t panic!
Calmly clarify if there is a citation being given and, if so, ask what law, code, or ordinance was violated.

02
Ask questions
Can you have a written copy of the violation? What law have you violated? What are the definitions included in the law/ordinance/code?

03
Educate
Contact local officials and share your story to educate them on the benefits of a native plant ordinance.

Current City of Columbia ordinance

ARTICLE VII. - WEEDS AND DEBRIS

Sec. 8-301. - Removal required.
It shall be unlawful for the owner and/or occupant of property to fail to cut grass, weeds and other overgrowth vegetation on property when the grass, weeds and other overgrowth vegetation is of a greater height than one foot on the average, or to permit the property to serve as a breeding place for mosquitoes, as a refuge for rats and snakes, as a collecting place for trash and litter, or as a fire hazard, any one of which situations is declared to be a nuisance. It shall be the duty of the owner and occupant to cut and remove all grass, weeds and other overgrowth vegetation as often as necessary so as to comply with this section. Vacant lots shall be cut at least three times per year, as required during the growing season (April through September). Heavily wooded lots where equipment cannot maneuver on the lot because of density of the area shall be trimmed within 100 feet of street right-of-way and adjacent improved property and kept free of litter.
(Code 1979, § 9-3021)
## Elements of a Native Plant Ordinance

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>01</th>
<th>Intent</th>
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<td>Defines the objectives and benefits of a certain ordinance. This will guide any interpretation or flexibility in the standards.</td>
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<th>02</th>
<th>Applicability</th>
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<td>Defines when a property owner is subject to the standards. Includes threshold activities and exemptions.</td>
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<th>03</th>
<th>Landscape Standards</th>
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<td>Defines which landscapes and vegetation are allowed as well as how landscapes are designed and managed.</td>
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<th>04</th>
<th>Plant lists</th>
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<td>Define terms in the ordinance. Refer to a regionally appropriate list that identifies native plants and noxious plants.</td>
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<th>05</th>
<th>Specifications and Procedures</th>
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<td>Specify how plants are installed and maintained. Create procedures for inspection, management, and enforcement.</td>
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<th>06</th>
<th>Enforcement and Penalties</th>
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<td>Procedures for inspection, management, and enforcement. What happens when the ordinance is violated.</td>
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BEGINNING THE PROCESS

Research and Educate

Research existing laws around native planting and ordinances. Educate yourself and others on the native plants and species in the local ecosystem as well as the benefits that having a native plant ordinance brings to the community.

Engage stakeholders and community

Created education and outreach opportunities to gauge interest of communities and address concerns.

Draft and revise an ordinance

Create guidelines based on native plants and ecosystem to outline purpose, intent, and definitions to present to local municipalities.

SUCCESES

Green Bay, Wisconsin

Passed ordinance with guidelines regarding what is unruly and what plants should be used to increase biodiversity.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Exempted natural landscapes from the “Public Nuisance” property code.

Austin, Texas

Members of the National Wildlife Federation's Certified Wildlife Habitat program gained exemption of Wildlife Habitat Projects from the city's Tall Grass Ordinances.

Maryland

Janet and Jeff Crouch defended their wildlife-friendly garden from the HOA which ultimately led to a state law requiring HOAs to permit environmentally-friendly gardening.
Who wants to work on a Native Plant Ordinance for Columbia?

For model ordinances, see:


If interested, contact: terry.wolfer@sc.edu

References


References


OpenAI. (2024). ChatGPT 3.5 [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat


Recommended resource