



HOW TO NATURALIZE YOUR YARD

A guide for Ontario residents
interested in cultivating a
natural garden.



WHY NATURALIZE?

Naturalizing your yard, even in part, is a commitment to promoting biodiversity. This commitment is significant as the United Nations has acknowledged that biodiversity is our strongest defense against climate change (United Nations, 2022). Naturalization of yards have been shown to support the thriving of pollinator and bird communities in residential areas and beyond (Sahraoui et al., 2021; Gerner et al., 2022; Amaya-Espinel, & Hostetler, 2019; Johnson & Colla, 2023).

Traditional turf grass lawns are costly, requiring increased water use, mowing, green house gas emissions and fertilizers (Watson et al., 2020). Natural gardens and rain gardens are more effective at stormwater retention and can therefore reduce flooding risks (McFarland et al., 2019)



Figure 1. Yellow Warblers migrate during the spring and fall. Urban trees offer stopover sites during migration for this species (Amaya-Espinel, & Hostetler, 2019). Source: Audubon, www.audubon.org

Gardening is a strategy to support mental and physical health providing a medium of connecting with nature and fostering well-being (Corley et al., 2021). Given that habitat destruction is the primary cause of global biodiversity decline, gardening also provides the opportunity to create habitat, most notably with a garden of native plant species, and can reverse this downward trend, as well as fight the great "Insectageddon" (Zitani, 2018). These are just some of the many personal, ecological and conservation benefits of choosing to cultivate a naturalized gardens.

WHAT CAN NATURALIZATION LOOK LIKE?

Naturalizing your lawn does not have to be an all or nothing daunting task. Small changes can be made that support biodiversity without overwhelming first time gardeners. Below are a few examples of small changes to your lawn that introduce naturalization.

Lawn Borders and Native Hedgerows

Hedgerows are a linear planting strategy of trees, shrubs, or gardens. They can border a lawn or property creating a visual privacy barrier while also supporting local biodiversity. The Canadian Wildlife Federation has a guide to planting hedgerows with helpful tips to aid in determining the ideal height for your hedgerow, considering overhead utility lines and other limitations, and choosing plants according to their height and width at maturity.” More of these tips can be found [here](#).

Hedges are great habitat for snakes. To see more on snake friendly gardening, click [here](#).



Figure 2. Mixed Hedge.
Source [Nature & Garden](#)

Foodscaping

There are so many ways to incorporate foodscaping on your lawn; fruit trees, edible flowers and beds of perennial vegetables to name a few. To gain inspiration and learn more about the benefits of foodscaping see the following [1000 Island Gardeners resource](#).

Meadowscaping

A gardening strategy inspired by natural meadows, using a range of grasses and flowers with overlapping blooming periods to support pollinators at significant times of the year. Meadowscaping can occur on a portion or the entirety of your lawn. Suggestions on how to plan and support this habitat can be found [here](#).

Planting a Tree

Every tree counts! Aside from aesthetic value, trees offer many ecological benefits like sequestering carbon, preventing erosion, managing stormwater, producing oxygen, habitat, shade and mental health benefits. Some tree species support habitat more than others. For example, native oaks, elms and cherry trees are significant food sources for birds. Looking into these benefits and considering what tree species exist in the area are important considerations when looking into this naturalization strategy.

Be sure to consider your city’s bylaws around planting trees before moving forward.

Here are some resources from the [Canadian Wildlife Federation](#) and [1000 Islands Masters Gardeners](#) about planting trees.



Figure 3.
Meadowscaping
pollinator patch

HOW TO BEGIN NATURALIZING YOUR LAWN?

The first step to naturalization is considering your space. What is the soil, moisture, sun, size and surrounding area like? A great resource to help understand these characteristics about your space and beginning to plan your garden is available on [Gardening for Birds](#).

When deciding what to plant, cold-hardiness is an important factor. What plants can thrive in your region? To learn more about cold-hardiness zones and find out which zone you live in see this [mapping resource](#).

Working within the bounds of what you can grow in the conditions of your garden you can determine your goals for gardening. Do you want to support pollinators, birds, grow food, all of the above? These answers will help inform your species selection.

PLANTING GUIDE

The following list offers a preliminary exploration of some potential species native to Ontario that could flourish in your naturalized lawn. This is not an exhaustive list and serves only as a jumping off point for your creative exploration of naturalized gardening.

Nannyberry *Viburnum lentago*

Type: Native, deciduous, shrub, tree
Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand
Mature Height: 300-600cm
Mature Spread: 180-360cm
Cold-hardiness zone: 2-8
Exposure: Full-partial sun
Water-use: Moist

Season of interest: Flowers in the spring. Berries in the summer / fall / winter.
Supports: Spring Azure Butterfly's caterpillar and larva, food source for birds and pollinators



Gray Dogwood *Cornus racemosa*

Type: Native, deciduous, shrub
Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand
Mature Height: 250-500cm
Mature Spread: 250-500cm
Cold-hardiness zone: 3-8
Exposure: Full-partial sun
Water-use: Moist but well drained, wet.

Season of interest: Blooms late spring, into the summer. Berries come out in the fall into the winter.
Supports: Insect pollinators, different species of birds.



Virginia Creeper *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*

Type: Native, deciduous, vine
Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand
Mature Height: 9m-15m
Mature Spread: 150cm - 3m
Cold-hardiness zone: 3-9

Exposure: Full-partial sun, shade
Water-use: Dry, moist but well drained
Season of interest: Flowers in the spring and summer. Berries in the fall into the winter.
Supports: Flowers support insect pollinators, berries are a food source for some songbirds.



Wild Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Mature Height: 15–90cm

Mature Spread: 30–60cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–8

Exposure: Full to partial sun

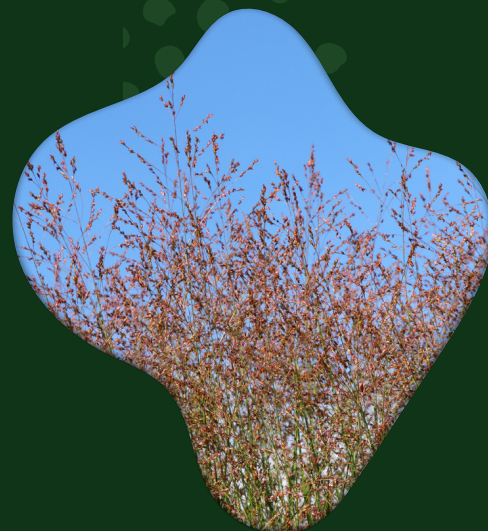
Water-use: Dry, moist but well drained

Season of interest: Blooms late spring, into early summer

Supports: Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black Swallowtail Butterfly, Mason Bees, Sweat Bees, Bumblebees, Hawk Moths and Columbine Borer Moth

Switchgrass

Panicum virgatum



Type: Grass, perennial

Soil: Sand loam, loam

Mature Height: 60–150cm

Mature Spread: 90cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–7

Exposure: Full sun

Water-use: Dry to medium moisture

Season of interest: Blooms late summer, into fall

Supports: Numerous Skipper and Satyr butterflies, food source for birds

Common Milkweed

Asclepias syriaca



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand

Mature Height: 60–120cm

Mature Spread: 45cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–9

Exposure: Full-partial sun

Water-use: Dry, moist but well drained

Season of interest: Blooms in the summer

Supports: The Monarch Butterfly's caterpillar feeds on this plant before they turn into a butterfly. Butterflies, moths, bumblebees, native bees, and beetles, among others rely on this plant as well.

Large-leaved Aster

Eurybia macrophylla



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, sand

Mature Height: 120cm

Mature Spread: 90cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–8

Exposure: Partial sun, shade

Water-use: Dry, moist but well drained

Season of interest: Flowers in the fall

Supports: Pollinators who are going into hibernation for the winter, as well as species who are making a long migration journey.

Red-osier Dogwood

Cornus sericea L.



Type: Native, deciduous, shrub

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand

Mature Height: 200–300cm

Mature Spread: 200–300cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 2–7

Exposure: Full-partial sun

Water-use: Moist but well drained, wet.

Season of interest: Blooms white flowers in the spring and summer. Berries in the fall and into the winter months

Supports: White flowers support insect pollinators and nectar for birds. The berries attract lots of different bird species as well.

Canada Violet

Viola canadensis



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand

Mature Height: 30cm–45cm

Mature Spread: 30cm–45cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–8

Exposure: Full-partial sun

Water-use: Moist but well drained, wet

Season of interest: Flowers in the spring

Supports: Flowers support insect pollinators and Fritillary butterfly larvae. Birds and small mammals use the seed fruits as a food source.

Stiff Goldenrod

Solidago rigida



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, sand

Mature Height: 60cm–150cm

Mature Spread: 30cm–60cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 3–9

Exposure: Full sun

Water-use: Dry, moist but well drained

Season of interest: Flowers in the fall

Supports: Flowers support insect pollinators.

Nectar and small seeds support some bird species

Boneset

Eupatorium perfoliatum



Type: Native, herb, perennial

Soil: Clay, coarse, loam, organic, sand

Mature Height: 90cm–160cm

Mature Spread: 90cm–120cm

Cold-hardiness zone: 4–8

Exposure: Full–partial sun

Water-use: Moist but well drained, wet

Season of interest: Flowers in the summer and fall

Supports: Flowers support insect pollinators.

Small seeds for birds

SOURCING LOCAL SUPPLIES AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

A common roadblock new gardeners face is where to source plants, seeds and supplies. To help address these concerns, check out this great resource from Halton Region Master Gardeners of Native Plants Nurseries in Southern Ontario [here](#). Jonas Spring, [EcoMan](#) with the Toronto Plant Market is another great resource for local plants.

Want more information of planting native species? The Nature Conservancy of Canada's "[Native Gardening 101](#)" guide, is a great place to start looking. Likewise, the Ontario Invasive Plant Council's "[Grow Me Instead](#)" guide includes many native options.

As a new gardener it is important to remember that you aren't alone! So many people have explored lawn naturalization and resources to learn from their mistakes and their triumphs are available online and in print. Many passionate and knowledgeable local gardeners and environmentalists have created resources to help guide you on your gardening journey!

Highlighted resources for further exploration:
[A Garden for the Rusty-Patched Bumblebee](#)
[Gardening for Birds](#)
[1000 Islands Master Gardeners](#)
[In the Zone](#)

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