

Create a Demonstration Garden

A project from Homegrown National Park®

What to know

A demonstration garden is one of the most effective tools for shifting how people think about landscaping. Much like a native plant garden tour, it allows neighbors to see what is possible rather than simply hearing about it. These gardens create “aha moments” by showing how native plants support birds, pollinators, and biodiversity while still being beautiful, intentional, and welcoming.

Why Create a Demonstration Garden?

A demonstration garden is more than a collection of plants. It is a visible commitment to education and stewardship. These gardens help to:

- Show how native landscapes can be beautiful.
- Educate neighbors about biodiversity and ecosystem health.
- Support birds, bees, butterflies, and beneficial insects.
- Provide a hands-on learning space for children and adults.
- Spark curiosity and conversations that lead to broader community change.

When people see success in a shared space, they are far more likely to replicate it at home.

Season

Spring, Fall

For

Communities, Teams, Families, Schools

Event Duration

6+ Hours, Ongoing

Instructions

Step 1 | Define Purpose, Select Location, and Consider a Sponsor

Before breaking ground, determine what you want the garden to teach or highlight.

Examples include:

- The importance of native plants
- Pollinator diversity (bees, butterflies, moths)

- Host plants for specific species
- Low-maintenance, chemical-free gardening

Design intentionally around your desired outcome.

Some location options include a community center, apartment courtyard, farmers market, garden club building, school, church, or your own yard.

Evaluate the Space:

- Identify the location and confirm permission if the land is municipal, HOA-owned, or otherwise shared.
- Private landowners are often eager partners when offered guidance and support.
- Start small if needed. Plots as small as 5' x 5' can be powerful.

Observe before selecting plants:

- Sun exposure
- Drainage and water retention
- Soil conditions (including how the site behaves during rainfall)

 Consider asking whether a local group can co-host or sponsor the event, such as a nursery, garden club, native plant society, or community organization. Sponsors may help with space, promotion, or materials. They may also come with expertise in caring for the plants.

Step 2 | Plan for Long-Term Maintenance

A successful demonstration garden depends on consistent care. A neglected garden undermines the message. If resources are limited, it is better to start small and do it well than to overextend.

Before planting:

- Identify a group to maintain the garden in the coming days, weeks, months, etc.
- Create a simple schedule using a calendar, sign-up sheet, or text group.
- Assign responsibility for watering, weeding, seasonal upkeep, and monitoring.

Consider starting a Facebook group to keep everyone updated and in the loop.

Step 3 | Design the Garden

Build Your Plant Palette

- Work with a local nursery that offers native plants
- Select species that bloom at different times of year for continuous interest
- Consider mature height and spread to ensure plants fill in and suppress invasives
- Purchase plants from one of our partners to support HNP as well

HNP Plant Partners: <https://homegrownnationalpark.org/buy-native-plants/>

 Use winter sowing to grow plants ahead of time and save money on plants. You can even use cuttings or seeds from plants that participants already have growing.

Enhance the experience if space allows:

- Include a path or bench to invite visitors to linger
- Design clear edges to help the garden feel intentional

- Incorporate educational signage explaining plant choices and ecological benefits (good way to convey goals from the beginning)
 Use laminated, plastic, or metal signs to create long-lasting signs and prevent waste.

Plan ahead for:

- ☐ Compost and mulch
- ☐ Cardboard (tape- and staple-free)
- ☐ Irrigation supplies if needed
- ☐ Plant labels and signage
- ☐ Planting tools
- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ First-aid kit

Step 4 | Promote Your Event

Community participation strengthens both impact and longevity. Some methods for advertising:

- Email announcement
- Facebook Event
- Flyer for local sharing
- Invite families and children—hands-on experiences foster deeper learning
- Reach out to Scout troops, schools, garden clubs, and homeschool groups
- Ask volunteers to bring basic tools and a willingness to learn

Optional: Encourage participants to bring a friend.

Optional: Invite local Native Plant Society, Wild Ones, garden clubs, etc. to join. They come well prepared, knowledgeable, and often have extra plants to share.

Below is our recommended timeline:

Social media

Post 1–2 weeks before your event (include photos, the film trailer, or graphics)
 Create a Facebook event and invite your network
 Tag local groups, organizations, or influencers

Email

Send a save-the-date, a reminder 1-2 weeks before, and a final reminder the day before

Flyers

Hang them at libraries, cafés, schools, and community centers

Partnerships

Ask local nurseries, conservation groups, or schools to co-host or spread the word

Step 5 | Planting Day

1. Take “before” photos
2. Clear turf or invasive plants (if this is a time-consuming task for your area, you may consider splitting the work into two days)
3. Create beds using a lasagna-style method:
 - a. Cardboard
 - b. Compost
 - c. Mulch (approximately 6 inches total depth)
4. Lay out plants according to the design
5. Dig wide, shallow holes through the cardboard
6. Loosen roots and plant at soil level
7. Water deeply
8. Mulch around plants, keeping mulch away from stems

Step 6 | After Planting

- Install signage (formal or informal)
- Activate your maintenance plan immediately
- Consider a ribbon-cutting, open house, or informal tour
- Share the garden’s story through HOA channels, local papers, or social media
- Add the native garden to the [HNP Biodiversity Map](#).

Recognition builds support. Thank donors, volunteers, and partner organizations publicly.

Helpful Guidance for Ongoing Success

- Allow plants to die back naturally in fall; seeds feed birds and stems shelter insects
- Use “chop and drop” pruning to reduce visual height while preserving habitat
- Add educational signs explaining seasonal changes to reduce misconceptions
- Visit the garden regularly, especially at seasonal transitions

With time, neighbors begin to associate the garden’s summer beauty with the need to protect it year-round. Patience with the garden and with people is essential.

Step 7 | Report Back and Help Us Improve!

Sharing your attendance numbers and event details is crucial. Your input directly helps us measure our collective impact and improve our resources. Did you do something special? We would love to see your marketing materials, photos, and hear about unique details to feature and incorporate for future events! [Contribute Your Feedback Here](#)

Keep in Mind

- This is an outdoor activity; weather should be considered and a backup date should be planned.
- Create a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere for all ages and abilities.

- Encourage participation and conversation.
- Allow plants to die back naturally in fall; seeds feed birds and stems shelter insects.
- Use “chop and drop” pruning to reduce visual height while preserving habitat.
- Add educational signs explaining seasonal changes to reduce misconceptions.
- Visit the garden regularly, especially at seasonal transitions.
- Take photos (avoid people's faces unless permission has been given).

Materials

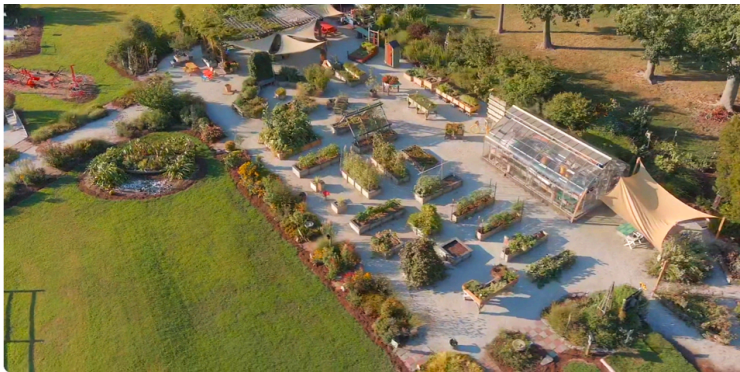
(Complete supply checklist)

- ☐ Name tags and markers/pens
 -  Laminated name tags and whiteboard markers
- ☐ Trowels, scoopers, or shovels
- ☐ Native plants (see recommended resources above)
- ☐ Wooden or plastic plant labels
- ☐ Watering cans or a water source on site
- ☐ Cardboard
- ☐ Compost
- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ Apron (optional)
- ☐ [HNP flyers/brochures](#)
- ☐ Books/printed references
- ☐ A handout with some of your favorite resources: Homegrown National Park links, local native plant sellers, your closest Wild Ones chapter, state/local Native Plant Society, conservation groups, any co-hosting organizations
 -  Single laminated copy with a QR code or follow-up email instead of printing

Related HNP Activities

- [Winter Sowing](#) - Use seeds from the mature plants to host a winter sowing event, now everyone has a native plant of their own.
- [Host a Garden Tour](#) - Once the garden is established, invite the community out to explore what native plants bring.
- [Build a Native Plant Library](#) - Use seeds from the mature plants to stock the library.

Examples



Thank you



This project was contributed by Michelle Stress.