

# Create a Demonstration Garden

A project from Homegrown National Park®

Duration: 2 - 3'

Prep Time: 2 - 3'

Engage your: Community

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.

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## 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.

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## Step 1: Define Your Purpose and Site

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.

Choose and 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)
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## 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 who will maintain the garden
  - Create a simple schedule using a calendar, sign-up sheet, or text group
  - Assign responsibility for watering, weeding, seasonal upkeep, and monitoring
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## Step 3: Design the Garden

Build Your Plant Palette

- Work with a local nursery that offers **native, pesticide-free 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

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)

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
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#### **Step 4: Invite the Community**

Community participation strengthens both impact and longevity.

- Advertise the planting day through newsletters, social media, or local groups
  - 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
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#### **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:
    - Cardboard
    - Compost
    - 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
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#### **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

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

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## 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.

## 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](#)



This project was contributed by Michelle Stress