

FIELD OF DREAMS

When Kurt moved to this house in December 2021, the backyard was empty save for an oak tree and a concrete basketball pad. The next year, Kurt read Doug Tallamy. He saw what needed to be done, and he got to it.

First, Kurt solarized the back of the lot. That winter, he sowed the prepared area with one pound of seed mix from Missouri Wildflowers, for a cost of less than \$100. The next summer—boom. He had a prairie. As well as nesting bluebirds, wild turkeys, coyotes, and all kinds of butterflies.

Kurt was hooked. He installed a wildlife pond, which brought frogs and turtles, and an incredible array of bird and mammalian visitors.

This garden is breathtaking, indisputable proof that if you plant it, they will come. Beware: a visit here may inspire you to imagine how much more wildlife your yard can be supporting, just two years from now.

LOOK FOR:

- The newly planted bird thicket of fruiting shrubs and trees
- The hand-dug pond, surrounded by rain and shade gardens
- The bird-watching bench at the top of the prairie (modeled after the ones favored by Aldo Leopold, author of *A Sand County Almanac*)



HOA HABITAT

Grown by a busy mother on a typical suburban subdivision backyard, this beautiful garden thrives while conforming to HOA standards and leaving space for Erin's six young children, their dog, and their play equipment.

OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

Despite its small footprint, the garden is full of blooms, and home to wildlife of all kinds, from pollinators to frogs. Erin's children (even three-year-old Elijah) are experts at spotting caterpillars and identifying birds.

LOWS & HIGHS

With many demands on her time and energy, Erin has found that native plants are not only easy but also useful. In a low area that has always been soggy and flooded after rain, moisture-loving natives like Obedient Plant, Copper Iris, Swamp Milkweed, Mistflower and Red Buckeye now absorb excess runoff and flourish in the damp soil.

LOOK FOR:

- Fruiting Chokeberry, Blackberry and Serviceberry bushes
- Beautiful Leather Flower vines
- Buttonbush, blooming for the first time this year!



PRIME PRAIRIE

Tim and Susan moved here twelve years ago, from suburban Overland Park. Soon after, Tim, who had admired a friend's reconstructed prairie, realized the same could be done on their own new property.

In 2014, a custom mix of native grasses and prairie flowers was seeded into the large sunny upland along the drive. This prairie is now ten years old, mature and rich. The original seed mix has been expanded with many new species, some added by Tim, others by birds and wind. Tim mimics natural rhythms by burning a third, mowing a third and leaving a third.

This is a large area, deceptive in scale. Bring a camp chair, hat and ice water. Find a spot on the edge and watch skippers flit, grasses wave in the breeze. Hear the thrum of millions of insects in millions of flowers.

LOOK FOR:

- The difference in plant diversity between the back quadrants and the eastern “front” section (closest to the road), which receives more sun.
- The incredible array of butterflies, skippers, bees and pollinators, especially species uncommon in smaller city or suburban yards.
- The stark contrast between the abundant life in the prairie stand and the empty turf grass lawn on the other side of the driveway.



PRAIRIE PROVENANCE

As Kansan Dorothy Gale said: “There’s no place like home.” And tallgrass prairie is home in Kansas City. While less than 5% of original prairie remains, we can do our part by growing more prairie plants here where we live.

TALLGRASS PRAIRIE Historic Area



PRAIRIE ENVY

Prairie gardens gained attention with the work of the rockstar Dutch designer Piet Oudolf, particularly at The High Line in New York City and Lurie Garden in Chicago. Both gardens were built around native prairie grasses and perennials like Big Bluestem, Switchgrass, Blazing Star and Rattlesnake Master, as well as common standards like sunflowers, asters and coneflowers.

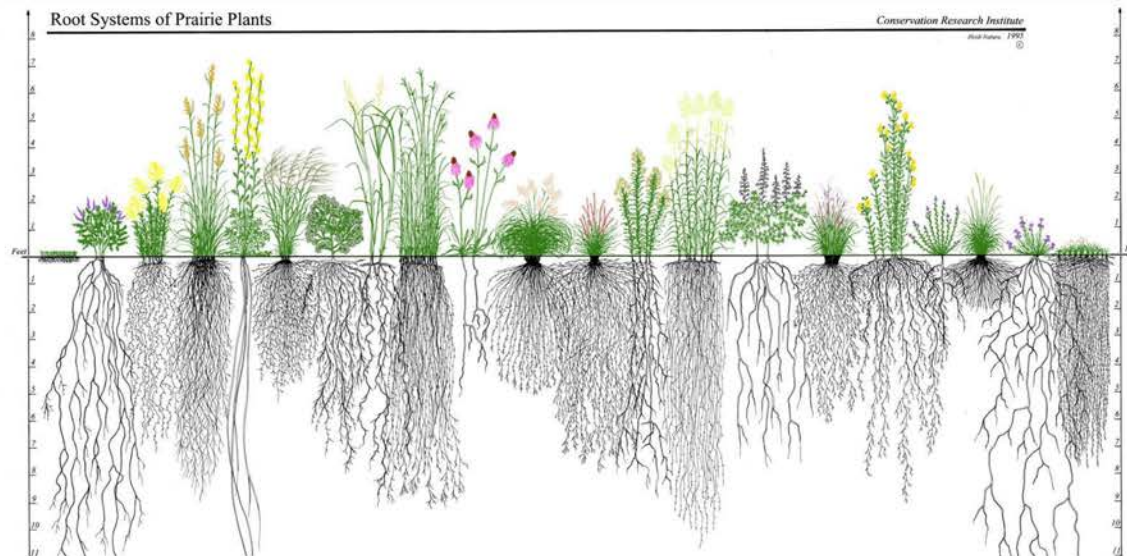
It's a classic case of the outsider making locals appreciate what they already have. Suddenly it was fashionable, not old-fashioned, to grow Joe Pye Weed and other "ditch flowers." Oudolf also insists on leaving plants in place over winter, to show the beauty of dried stems and seedheads. The side benefit of this practice is the preservation of nesting sites and protective structural habitat.

Oudolf loves prairie natives so much he uses them in Europe, where they are much admired and sought after, including species considered weeds here, like daisy fleabane. Ironically, our natives are foreign there, and thus of little use to their ecosystems.



TALLGRASS, DEEP ROOTS

The massive root systems of prairie plants are valued for combating erosion and absorbing runoff. But they are receiving new attention for their ability to sequester enormous amounts of carbon, crucial in the struggle to slow climate change. And as our weather becomes more erratic, prairie roots, being underground, are more able to remain resilient.



Conservation Research Institute
Buck Jones, 1992

WHAT IS A PRAIRIE?

And what's the difference between prairie and "regular" garden?

Grown entirely or primarily from seed mix, prairies are composed of mixed, diverse native grasses and perennials, rather than intentionally designed beds or drifts of single species.

Prairies are by definition tree-less, so these are plants that love full sun. Under that sun, prairie plants grow big, like Big Blustem, which grows to six feet, and Compass Plant, which grows to eight. Below ground, their roots descend twice or even three times as long, anchoring their tall form and helping them survive harsh growing conditions like drought and fire.

Tallgrass prairie once covered the northern third of Missouri and eastern third of Kansas — which is to say, the Kansas City region. These vast, dense stands of giant plants provided habitat for many grassland bird species that are now rare or at risk, like the meadowlark, scissor-tailed flycatcher, upland sandpiper, boblink, northern bobwhite and horned lark.



THAT'S THE THICKET

Plant descriptions often use the terms “suckering,” “thicketing” or “thorny.” This is true of many wonderful native fruiting and berrying species like Gooseberry, Elderberry, Hazelnut*, Wild Cherry* and Wild Plum*.

Those terms can sound like warnings or scary. But bird lovers should understand them as inducements. Berry thickets offer the ideal habitats birds seek, providing both food and shelter.

While the appeal of seasonal fruit is obvious, many thicketing species (including those starred above) are also Keystones, meaning they host a lion’s share of insects, providing the larvae needed to support baby birds.

Many of us have a neglected fence line or back corner. Those are ideal places for thickets. Kurt has planted his side property line with conservation department saplings.





Big & Beautiful

It's all about that Biomass.

To the eyes of a hungry bird, our stretches of pristine lawn are tragically barren. With ever fewer sources of food and habitat, songbird populations have decreased by a third in our lifetime and are dwindling fast. How do we help? Shift your aesthetic, from *Neat* to *Replete*.

It's no accident that top keystone species like oaks, asters and goldenrod are big and abundant. Giant trees and large stands of lush-leafed, profusely blooming flowers:

- host more insects,
- sequester more carbon,
- absorb more stormwater,
- produce more food and
- provide more habitat.

In short, big is bountiful. Go home and go big!

Jerusalem Artichoke (Helianthus tuberosus) in Christopher Leitch's garden. Photo by C. Leitch.

Ten Steps Everyone Can Take

Pick a Step and Start Today!

1. Shrink the lawn.
2. Remove invasives.
3. Focus on keystones.
4. Plant more: more area, more layers, more species.
5. Say no to poison. Pristine, green, weed-free lawn is possibly only with the use of herbicide, insecticide and chemical fertilizer — 100 million tons a year in the U.S.
6. Be visible. Help shift the landscaping aesthetic in Kansas City — grow habitat gardens where people can see.
7. Minimize outdoor light pollution. Night lights kill.
8. Reduce disruptions like mowing and blowing.
9. Help caterpillars live: Leave the leaves, grow soft landings.
10. Sharing is caring. Exercise influence with your HOA, book club, church, business and friends. Help change norms .



(adapted from Doug Tallamy's Nature's Best Hope & Homegrown National Park)

KC Keystones : Trees & Shrubs

Monarch butterflies famously lay their eggs exclusively on Milkweed, but most other (90%) butterfly and moth species (Lepidoptera) lay theirs mostly on a few crucial native trees and shrubs (by # of species hosted):

Oak (436)



White Oak (*Quercus alba*)



Pin Oak (*Quercus palustris*)



Chinkapin Oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*)

Cherry/Plum (340)



Wild Plum (*Prunus americana*)



Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*)



Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*)

Willow (289)



Prairie Willow (*Salix humilis*)



Black Willow (*Salix nigra*)



Sandbar Willow (*Salix interior*)

More Keystones



River Birch (*Betula nigra* - 284)



Sugar maple (*Acer saccharum* - 238)



Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum* - 238)



KC Keystones : Herbaceous Perennials

While keystone trees are by far the most valuable hosts of Lepidoptera (the foundation of the food web), these perennials do their part by supporting both Lepidoptera and specialist pollinators (combined # of species hosted):

Goldenrod (146)



Gray Goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*)



Cliff Goldenrod (*Solidago drummondii*)



Showy Goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*)

Aster (133)



Aromatic Aster (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*)



Smooth Aster (*Symphyotrichum laeve*)



New England Aster (*Symphyotrichum novaeangliae*)



Sunflower (116)



Western Sunflower (*Helianthus occidentalis*)



Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*)



Maximilian Sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*)

"Susans" / Coneflower (42)



Sweet Coneflower (*Rudbeckia subtomentosa*)

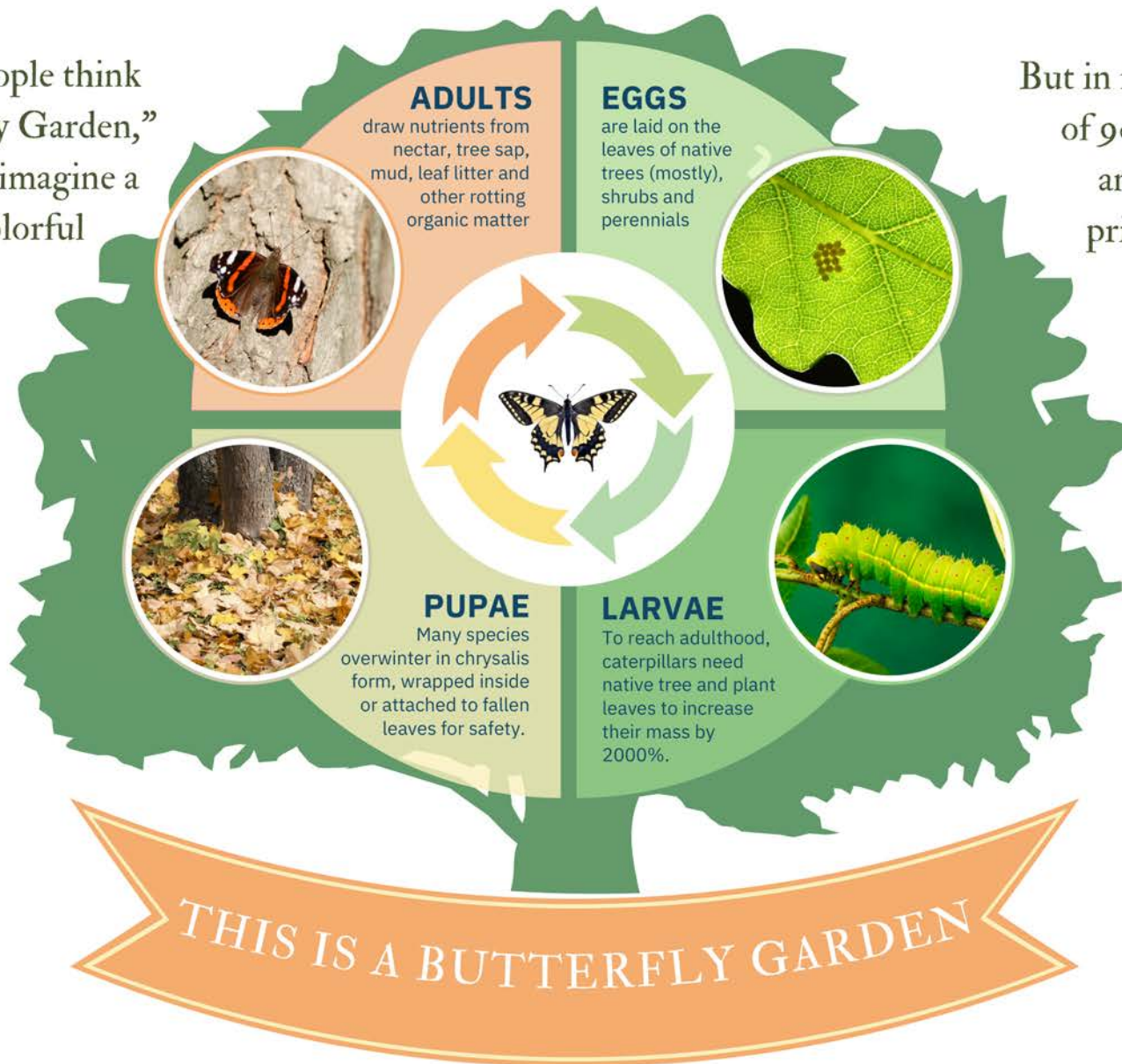


Orange Coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*)



Missouri Coneflower (*Rudbeckia missouriensis*)

When people think “Butterfly Garden,” they may imagine a field of colorful flowers.



But in fact the life cycle of 90% of butterflies and moths depend primarily on native trees (especially oaks).