



## HABITAT GARDEN TOURS

# BLUE RIVER VALLEY

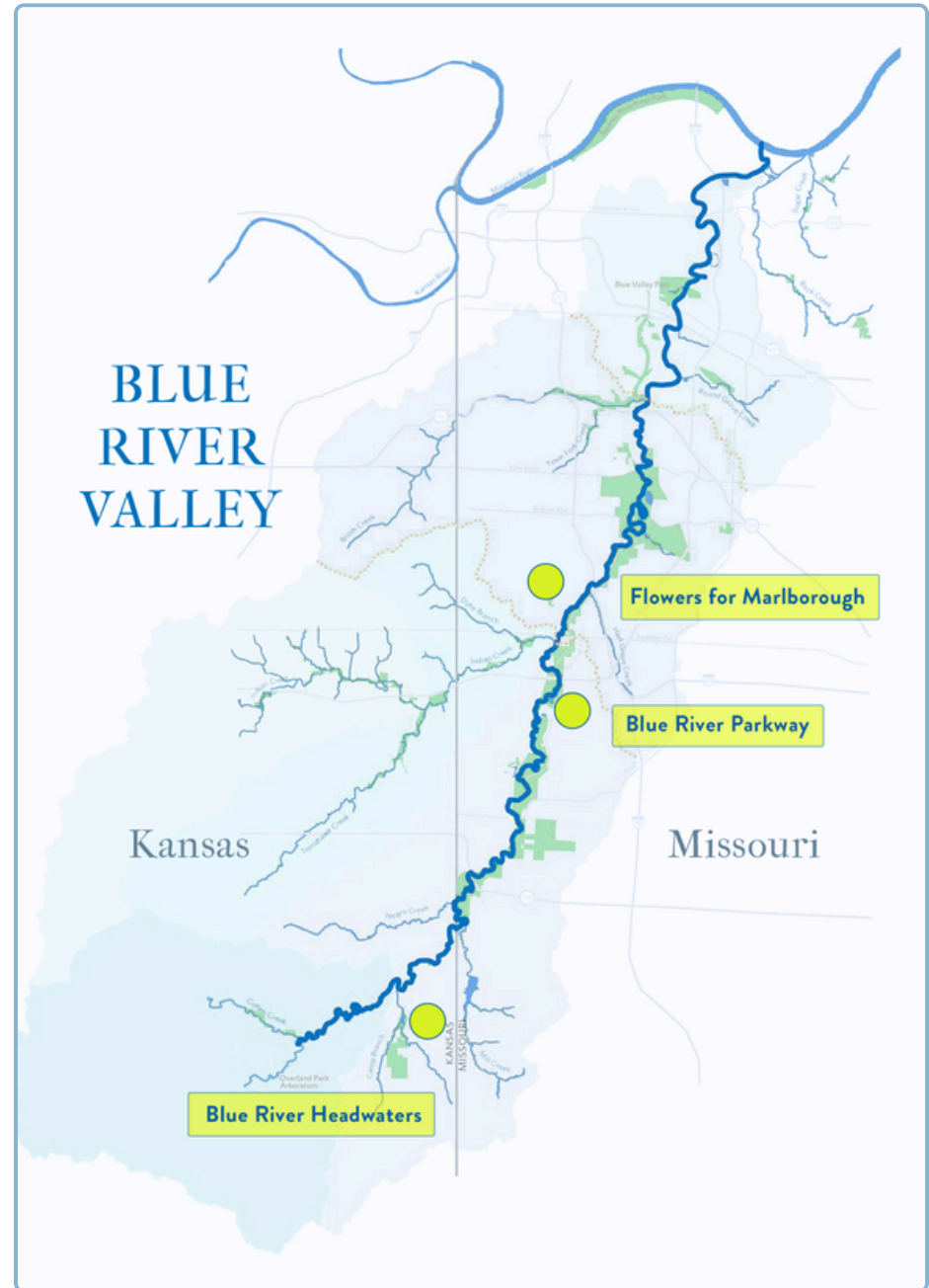
Like the Nile and the Shenandoah, the Blue River flows south to north, from its origin near the Overland Park Arboretum (and the Blue Valley School District), to its terminus into the Missouri River. Two-thirds of the water in our metro drains into the Blue River, and half a million residents live in its watershed.

Our three August gardens lie along its course:

Blue River Headwaters - Stilwell, KS

Blue River Parkway - KCMO

Flowers for Marlborough - KCMO



# THE BIG BLUE

It's in the names: Blue Valley, Blue Ridge, Blue Hills, Blue Parkway, Blue River Road, Big Blue Battlefield, Blue Summit, Blue Township.

The prevalence of “Blue” places gives a clue to the centrality of what was originally called the Big Blue River (vs. the Little Blue to the east).

As in the vintage video game *The Oregon Trail*, the Big Blue was the first obstacle faced by many westbound wagon trains. The crossing became safer with the building of the Red Bridge in 1859, but in 1846, after heavy spring rains, the Donner Party struggled to cross the Big Blue without benefit of a bridge.

Swope Park was sited around a meandering stretch of the Blue River, its lake and lagoon created by damming oxbows along its course. And as recently as the 1920s, the Blue River really was blue, a popular and beautiful destination for outdoor recreation.

*All images used with permission of Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.*





# BLUE RIVER HEADWATERS

Almost 30 years ago, Connie and Mike bought this small farm from a woman whose family survived the Depression here by raising dairy cows and selling the property's large rocks for new house construction in Mission Hills. Its unsuitability for crop farming kept much of the rocky land intact, including mature oak and hickory woods. However, the creek banks were denuded from grazing cows, and other areas were overrun with brome and Osage Orange.

As these were cleared, Connie and Mike observed the re-emergence of native flowering plants and woodland spring ephemerals — and with them, birds and butterflies. Inspired, the couple set out to restore more land, year by year. They sowed sweeping prairies and tallgrass fields; established stands of Buttonbush, Chokeberry and Ninebark shrubs; and continue to plant native trees.

Seeing the incredible wildlife drawn to the spring-fed creek, which flows into the Blue River, they created a small pond by the house. It was full of frog eggs almost immediately, and their summer evenings are filled with frog song.

## LOOK FOR:

- Ripe Hazelnuts and Pecans; fruits and berries in the Bird Shrub Islands
- The many beautiful natives that occur here naturally, like Wild Petunia, Rosinweed, Purple Coneflower and Sunflower and Milkweed species.
- Many resident and migratory bird species (see next page)



# BLUE HEADWATERS BIRDS

American Crow	Eastern Meadowlark	Red-bellied Woodpecker
American Goldfinch	Eastern Phoebe	Red-eyed Vireo
American Robin	Eastern Towhee	Red-winged Blackbird
Bald Eagle	Field Sparrow	Red-shouldered Hawk
Baltimore Oriole	Great Blue Heron	Red-tailed Hawk
Belted Kingfisher	Great Crested Flycatcher	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Black-capped Chickadee	Hairy Woodpecker	Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	Harris's Sparrow	Summer Tanager
Blue Jay	House Finch	Tennessee Warbler
Broad-winged Hawk	Indigo Bunting	Tufted Titmouse
Brown Creeper	Lincoln's Sparrow	Turkey Vulture
Brown Creeper	Louisiana Waterthrush	Warbling Vireo
Brown Thrasher	Mallard	White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren	Mourning Dove	White-crowned Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow	Nashville Warbler	White-throated Sparrow
Clay-colored Sparrow	Northern Cardinal	Wild Turkey
Common Yellowthroat	Northern Mockingbird	Wood Duck
Dark-eyed Junco	Northern Parula	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Downy Woodpecker	Pileated Woodpecker	Yellow-throated Vireo
Eastern Bluebird	Purple Finch	



RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET



BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER



INDIGO BUNTING



NORTHERN PARULA



Remnant Shagbark Hickory Grove

Wild Plum Thicket

Bird Shrub Islands: Ninebark, Chokeberry, Buttonbush, Wild Grape, Winterberry, Crabapple, Elderberry, Blackhaw, Pecan, Serviceberry, Pawpaw

Prairie Lanes

Barn

Tallgrass Fields:  
Indian Grass &  
Big Bluestem

Frog Pond

Hazelnut Boulevards

Woodland Trails to Creek  
(100-foot elevation drop)

Spring-Fed Creek to the Blue River  
(Creek bank / rich low woods habitat)



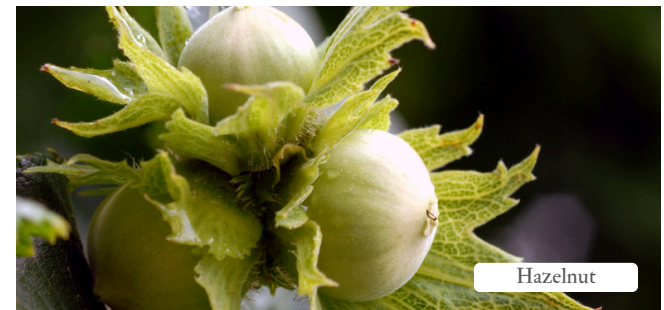
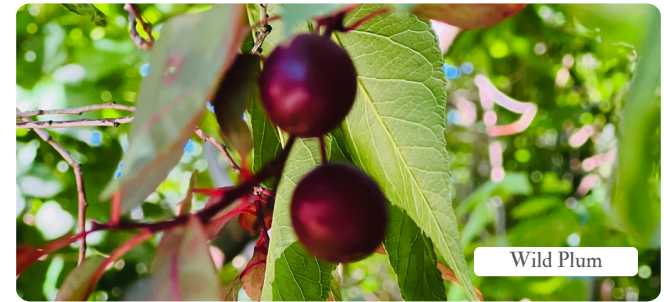
## THAT'S THE THICKET

Plant descriptions may include words like “suckering,” “thicketing” or “thorny.” This is true of many wonderful native fruiting and berrying species like Gooseberry, Elderberry, Hazelnut\*, Black Cherry\* and Wild Plum\*.

Bird lovers should interpret those terms as inducements, not warnings. Berry thickets provide ideal habitats for birds, who seek them out not only to forage, but also because dense or thorny stems give excellent cover from predators.

The appeal of seasonal fruit is obvious, but many thicketing species (like those starred above) are also Keystones, meaning they host a lion’s share of insects and their larvae, the necessary food for baby birds to survive.

Unused back corners or hard-to-mow fence lines are perfect places for thickets, and thickets can also do double duty as a privacy hedge or screening. Wherever you grow them, your local birds will thank you.



# BLUE RIVER PARKWAY

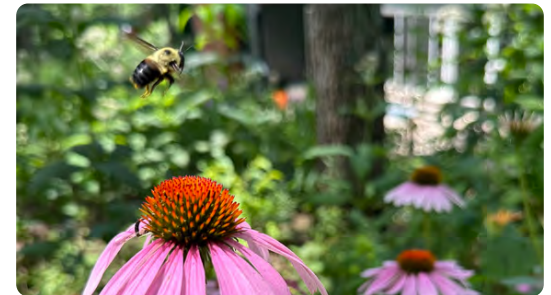
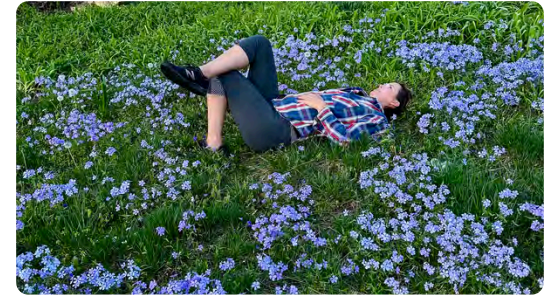
A dedicated mountain biker, Sarah moved here from Brookside for the miles of parkway trails just out the door: “You don’t have to leave the city to experience nature. There’s no loading up the car, driving for hours. It’s all right here.”

Sarah and her husband Cameron are fierce protectors of the parkway and the nature it affords both wildlife and city residents. Sarah volunteers with Urban Trail Co, has served on the Board of Directors at Heartland Conservation Alliance, and advocated for protection of the parkway against encroaching development in local media and before Jackson County legislators.

This house was previously owned by an avid gardener, and though the gardens were neglected when Sarah arrived in 2019, in addition to daylilies and phlox cultivars, there were natives like Bee Balm and Purple Coneflower, and a glade of spring ephemeral Wild Sweet William. Sarah has since planted and sown many more natives, and watched the magic arrival of others (like Cup Plant and Clasp Coneflower), mostly likely carried by birds from the remnant prairie at Jerry Smith Park, just a short flight along the Blue River Parkway.

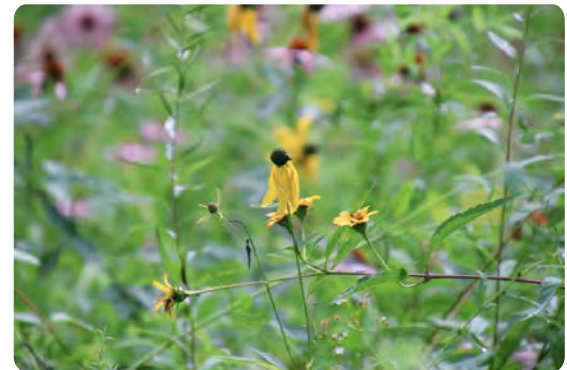
## LOOK FOR:

- The lush Coral Honeysuckle trellis framing the front door
- Shade- and juglone-tolerant species (like Joe Pye and Brown-Eyed Susan) holding the steep slope, absorbing runoff and thriving under walnut trees.
- A brand-new, beautifully designed rain garden in the sunny front yard





# BLUE RIVER TRAILS (Swope Park)



*Lakeside Nature Center trail photos by [Corey Seeman](https://www.flickr.com/photos/cseeman/), used with permission ([flickr.com/photos/cseeman](https://www.flickr.com/photos/cseeman/))*



# FLOWERS FOR MARLBOROUGH

Julie and Justin and their young sons Gustavo and Matteo moved to the Marlborough neighborhood when the rent on the other side of Troost became unaffordable. Marlborough is the epicenter of the Middle Blue River Green Infrastructure Project, targeted at the frequent floods that have wreaked damage to housing and infrastructure, leading to a 28% vacancy rate.

Julie and her family live near Rachel Morado Plaza, a major component of this green infrastructure project. Inspired by its native plantings, Julie, a professor of painting at the Kansas City Art Institute, created a project called Flowers for Marlborough, painting local public spaces with locally native flowers — the “non-human neighbors who help keep our houses from flooding.”

These same native flowers flourish in the moist soil in Julie’s home garden. She estimates that 90% of her plants were grown from seed, a process she loves: “Seeds are magic!” She grows so many she has been able share hundreds of seedlings: “These are the plants that are supposed to be here,” she says, “and I don’t want money to get in the way of people living among them.”

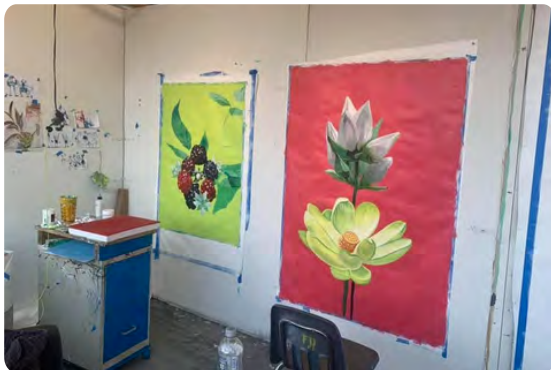
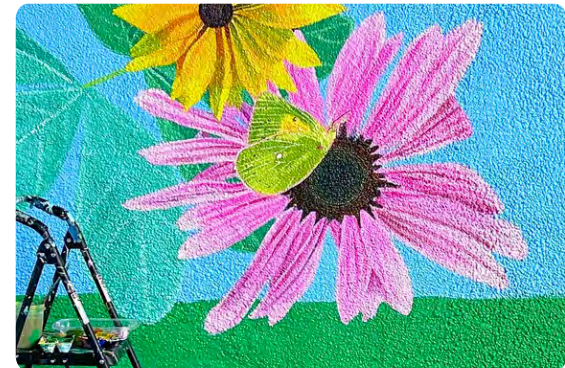
## LOOK FOR:

- Passionflower fruiting on trellises Julie made from downed branches
- Free native plant seedlings and Julie’s winter sowing set-up
- Moisture-lovers like Ironweed, Cutleaf Coneflower and Gray’s Sedge





# FLOWERS FOR MARLBOROUGH



Artwork and photos by *Julie Farstad* - [juliefarstad.net](http://juliefarstad.net)



# UPRIVER & DOWNRIVER

Wherever we live, we are upstream and downstream of others.

As continued development replaces water-retaining native plants with shallow-rooted turf and impermeable roofs and pavement, more and more stormwater and flooding are pushed downstream.

Meanwhile, herbicides and insecticides used to control “weeds,” “pests,” mosquitos and “disease” in U.S. lawns and gardens (100 million tons every year) seep into our groundwater, and thus into all of us.

- [Clean Water KC Metro](#)
- [Johnson County Contain the Rain](#)
- [Renew the Blue River: Urban Waters Federal Partnership](#)
- [Heartland Conservation Alliance: Blue River Action Plan](#)
- [Flatland KC: Why Care about the Blue River Watershed?](#)
- [KCUR: This Kansas City River is in Trouble](#)
- [Nature Conservancy: The Blue River Is Kansas City's River](#)
- [Conservation Fund Marlborough Overview](#)

The #1 Step You Can Take  
*(illustrated by Julie, see next page)*





# 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. American lawns use 100 million tons of herbicide, insecticide and chemical fertilizer a year.
6. Be visible. Grow habitat gardens where people can see and help shift the landscaping aesthetic in Kansas City.
7. Minimize outdoor light pollution. Night lights kill.
8. Reduce disruptions like mowing and blowing.
9. Help caterpillars: Leave the leaves, grow soft landings.
10. Sharing is caring. Exercise your influence with your HOA, book club, church, business and friends.



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