

Conservation@Home

extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/conservationhome

shaping private and community landscapes in a conservation-minded way

Spring Newsletter

Spring is a season of awakening, when the first wildflowers push through the soil and woodland floors come alive with brief, beautiful blooms. By removing invasive plants and giving spring ephemerals the space and light they need, we can help protect these fleeting treasures and the pollinators that depend on them. With just a little care, our spring landscapes can support a vibrant native display that returns year after year.



Spring Ephemerals



Spring ephemerals are our woodland's most beautiful early surprises symbolizing the long-awaited end of winter. These early native beauties have adapted to our ecosystem and have a unique way of growing. Some of these plants will go through their full life cycle before other plants even begin to emerge for the season. They grow, flower, and reproduce early in the spring so they do not have to compete with other surrounding foliage. Most native trees and shrubs of the forest don't compete with them because they leaf out later.

However, the rapid spread of invasive species over the past several decades is a growing concern threatening these beautiful plants. Several woodland invasive species have a growing season that begins early and outcompetes native spring ephemerals. The invasive plants of most concern for our local forests include autumn olive, bush honeysuckle, and garlic mustard. It is so important to actively remove these invasive plants to restore a healthy ecosystem and allow native plants to thrive.

In many woodland areas after invasive species removal has occurred, spring ephemerals will naturally reestablish back into the ecosystem. In several cases plants such as spring beauties, dutchman's breeches, mayapples, prairie trillium, and jack-in-the-pulpit have reestablished very quickly and thrive. What a fulfilling surprise to those who spend time removing invasive species, the great reward of these native spring treasures shining through.

Karen Weigelt, Agriculture & Natural Resources Program Coordinator



Invasive Removal Showcase: Spring Creek Preserve

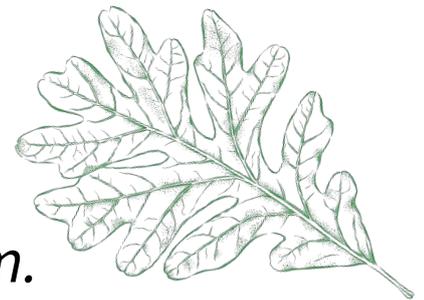
Submitted by Mike McGraw, Master Naturalist & Project Leader

What is Spring Creek Preserve?

Spring Creek Preserve, located in Tazewell County, is a park of the East Peoria Fondulac Park District. Of its 344 acres, 236 have been designated as an Illinois Land and Water Preserve.

Spring Creek is rich in both plant and animal life. Surveys done there between 2005 and 2017 identified over 60 species of birds, nine of which are listed as Species in Greatest Need of Conservation in Illinois.

Over 200 species of trees and herbaceous plants can also be found at Spring Creek. These include twelve species of ferns, as well several uncommon native orchids. Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris*) one of the more infrequently found native shrubs in Illinois, grows there in great numbers.



The invasive plant problem.

Invasive plants are a problem in Spring Creek, as they are in many other Central Illinois woodlands. The most common are bush honeysuckle, autumn olive, multiflora rose, and garlic mustard.

Others include burning bush, round-leaf bittersweet, barberry, privet, tree of heaven, and Callery pear. These lack natural predators or diseases that control their populations in their native range, allowing them to outcompete the native species for resources.

Work to control invasives.

I became involved in invasive control work at Spring Creek shortly after I completed my Master Naturalist training in 2022. I am currently involved in three different types of projects there.

1. Master Volunteer workdays. The second Wednesday of every month, I lead Master Volunteer workdays at Spring Creek Preserve. For the few weeks during the Spring and Summer when it is in bloom, we cut and bag garlic mustard. The rest of the time we cut and stump treat, with herbicide, woody invasives such as bush honeysuckle, autumn olive, and multiflora rose.

2. Professional invasive removal. While most larger invasives, especially autumn olive and bush honeysuckle, have been eliminated from the Preserve, there are still a few places where those are still a problem. Last year a professional invasive control company was hired for two days to target these areas. We plan on bringing them back for several more days of work this year. My involvement in this, as a volunteer, includes communication, site selection, and monitoring.

3. Ad hoc workdays. Lastly are the days that I go to Spring Creek on my own, with a pruning saw and a pair of loppers. I find this to be a great way to be out in the woods, do something useful, and get those much-needed volunteer hours.



Looking to share more about the conservation efforts at your Master Gardener or Master Naturalist Project?

Spring Creek Preserve Cont.

Why I do this work, and why I do it at Spring Creek Preserve.

I grew up in Alton, Illinois, in a house near the edge of town. It was only a short walk from my front door, and into the woods. I would go there often, just to wander, and to be surrounded by trees and wildflowers.

What I remember most vividly from this time was the incredible display of spring ephemerals. In my memory, for a few weeks every Spring, they were everywhere, and in great numbers. Plants like dutchman's breeches, spring beauty, rue anemone, dog tooth violet, trillium, Jacob's ladder, Virginia bluebells, and wild geranium. I believe it was this experience, in large part, that instilled in me a lifelong love of nature, of plants (especially native ones), of gardening, of trees and forests, and which eventually led me to the Master Naturalist program.

Sadly, I believe that the amazing display of Spring ephemerals that I remember from my time in Alton may one day be impossible to find, at least here in Central Illinois. So many of our woodlands are being taken over by invasives. These create conditions in which spring ephemerals, and other native plants, simply cannot grow.

Spring Creek Preserve, though, is still a place where you can still see an amazing display of spring wildflowers, ferns, and other native plants. And that is only because of the dedication of a few volunteers who, over many years, have worked hard to keep Spring Creek largely free of invasives. I want to continue that work so that for at least a few more years, I will be able to enjoy, practically in my own backyard, that which made me a nature lover in the first place. I hope others will continue to enjoy them too.

Mike McGraw, Master Naturalist & Project Leader



*Lori Hanson, MN & Janine Donahue, MN/MG
Garlic Mustard Removal*



*Lady's Slipper Orchid
Rare Wildflower found at Spring Creek Preserve*

Invasive Removal Showcase: Elwood Wildlife Preserve

ELWOOD WORK DAYS

3rd Sunday & 3rd Wednesday

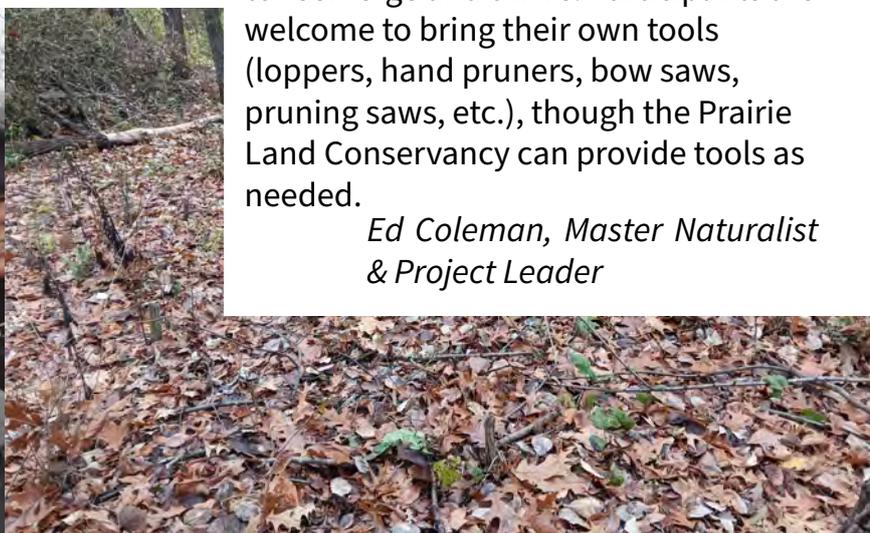
9:00 am to Noon

Every Month

4607 W Elwood Drive, Peoria IL

Come join a consistent crew to improve the Elwood Wildlife Preserve

For More information, contact
Ed Coleman Colemane296@gmail.com
John Meyers 7737Meyers@gmail.com



In 2020, the family members of the John Elwood and Mary Elwood Trust donated a 75.5 acre tract of land in Peoria County to the Prairie Land Conservancy, a land trust. Five acres of this was grassland at one time, and the remaining acreage is woodland. The property is now known as the Elwood Wildlife Preserve.

The Conservancy's goals for Elwood are to protect and restore the woodland and grassland areas to their earlier condition, thus ensuring long-lasting ecosystems for our native wildlife. Volunteers gather on the 3rd Sunday and 3rd Wednesday of each month from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to improve the site by removing invasive plant species. Because these non native plants lack natural constraints here, they quickly outcompete native vegetation for sunlight, water, nutrients, and space.

By removing bush honeysuckle, autumn olive, oriental bittersweet, Japanese barberry, multiflora rose, and garlic mustard, volunteers open up the understory and allow sunlight to reach the woodland floor. Consequently, native plants are given the opportunity to reemerge and thrive. Participants are welcome to bring their own tools (loppers, hand pruners, bow saws, pruning saws, etc.), though the Prairie Land Conservancy can provide tools as needed.

Ed Coleman, Master Naturalist & Project Leader

Native Plant Spotlight: Dutchman's Breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*)



Dutchman's breeches is a delightful native spring ephemeral that plays an important early-season role in woodland ecosystems. Blooming in early to mid-spring, its distinctive white, pantaloon shaped flowers provide nectar for emerging queen bumblebees and other early native bees, when few other floral resources are available. Because of this timing, it helps bridge the critical gap between winter dormancy and the fuller flush of late spring blooms.

Beyond its value as a nectar source, Dutchman's breeches supports insects through its specialized pollination relationship with long-tongued bees, particularly bumblebees. The plant is also part of the broader woodland food web: its seeds are dispersed by ants in a process called myrmecochory, which helps spread and establish colonies naturally over time. As with many spring ephemerals, its brief above-ground life cycle makes it especially vulnerable to competition from invasive groundcovers that can shade or crowd out emerging plants.

From a habitat design perspective, Dutchman's breeches is best suited to shady woodland gardens and naturalized areas. It prefers rich, moist, well-drained soils and thrives under deciduous trees where it receives full spring sunlight and summer shade.



The plant typically grows 6 to 12 inches tall, forming soft mounds of finely divided, blue-green foliage that disappear by early summer as the plant goes dormant. Once established in the right conditions, it is low maintenance and can slowly naturalize, making it a charming and ecologically meaningful addition to native shade plantings.

Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator



Find further reading at: go.illinois.edu/dutchmansbreeches

C@H Member Spotlight: Gordon & Joyce Wassell



Driving up the street in a Morton subdivision searching for the home of new Conservation at Home members Gordon and Joyce Wassell, one needs no house number to know which place is theirs. All along their street, houses sit on wide expanses of sterile lawn, not a weed in sight. Well behind every house thick, dense snarls of woods serve as distant, wild backdrops. The back edge of each lawn serves as a strict demarcation boundary. Every property looks the same. Every property, that is, except one. One house sits tucked lovingly into the woods as if it grew there, like a secret hideaway, surrounded by trees that cover the entire property. Asking yourself “which of these properties is a place a lot of creatures might call home” would lead you right to their place!



Joyce learned about Conservation@Home while in the Master Gardener training course. The philosophy closely resonates with her own. She ran down the list and noticed that everything was already in place to qualify. She applied in hopes that having the sign posted would encourage people passing by to ask questions.



While all their neighbors tackled the dense woods by hiring heavy equipment to pulverize the vegetation in the front portion of their lot in order to clear a house site, Joyce and Gordon employed a unique approach. With a guiding philosophy “to disturb the landscape and its inhabitants as little as possible, respecting what lived here first.” They hand cleared all 4 acres!



They decided that the first step would be to look around and get the lay of the land, which was a challenge considering they had a hard time getting far enough back just to mark their house site. They targeted the areas of most need first, removing invasive plant species and securing the hillside where their walkout basement would be from erosion. There was honeysuckle everywhere and wild rose bushes over their heads with trunk-like stems that had to be removed with a chainsaw, some weighing over 80 pounds! Removing these was physically taxing but cleared large spaces at once for tangible progress each day. As they progressed, they noticed obvious next steps, and the process unfolded slowly and organically over several years.

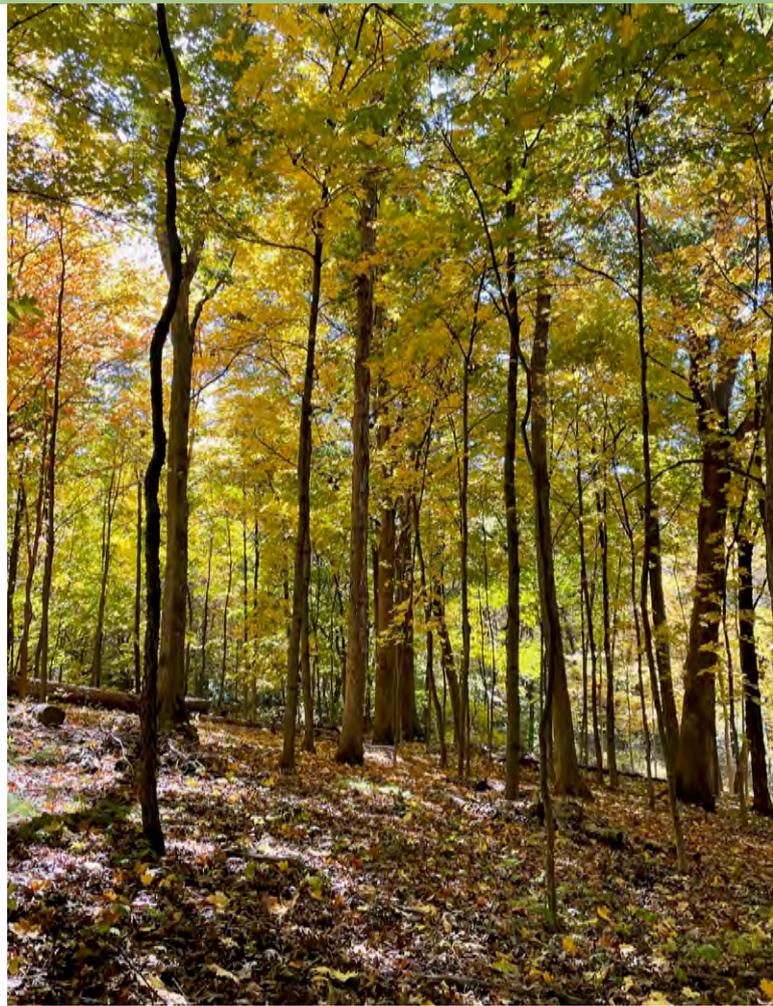
Gordon & Joyce Wassell ~ Member Spotlight Cont.

Once the obvious invasive plants were removed, the Wassells relied on their experience and some extensive research to make more nuanced decisions. Smaller trees were selectively removed thinning the canopy and allowing filtered sunlight through. This encouraged an array of other existing plants and wildflowers, like Jack-in-the-pulpits, to emerge. Another tough but necessary decision was removing a grove of nettle that stood 7 feet tall. The nettle was so thick that they couldn't walk in that section of their yard without their faces stinging. It had to go. Realizing that some butterflies benefitted from it, they researched and planted other plants that would provide habitat. Gordon used a power saw on a long pole, "It was a pleasure to cut them."

Being the yard that is different from all the others requires diplomacy and compromise. Every invasive plant species that the Wassells have painstakingly removed grow in abundance in the untouched back woods of neighboring properties. They will always get seeds blown in by winds and transplanted by birds and wildlife.

I asked Joyce and Gordon if they had advice they would share with anyone wanting to develop a property of their own using similar principles. They both said, "It is important to work with your property and not fight nature. Understand that when you remove invasives they are going to come back. This can be discouraging, but every time they return they are a little smaller and eventually the roots systems get spent. Don't force anything. That takes the fun out of it. Choose plants that are hardy with the least amount of work. Understand that you can't fight the deer. They will always win. If deer find a plant and eat it, you are better to plant something else that they don't like. Also, find or form a network to join for sharing information, where you can ask questions and get updates on issues that could affect your property. Ask questions about a pest rather than just reaching for something to spray. And one of the points that they most strongly emphasized is that your property is never 'done'. Maintenance is ongoing, but well worth it!"

Megan Todd, Master Gardener



C@H Member Spotlight: Lynda Sharp-Lower



In 2018, Lynda and her husband Jeff moved into their current home and set to work on taking care of their almost 2-acre property that sits on a small lake, surrounded by other homes. Encouraged by her neighbor, friend, and Master Gardener, Michelene Koch; in 2019, Lynda joined the Illinois Extension Master Gardener Volunteers. One of her first projects as an intern was a pollinator garden at Peoria Zoo. It was there that she was first introduced to native plants and their benefits by Master Gardener, May Bach. Lynda credits May with cultivating her knowledge and curiosity for native plants. As for the Conservation@Home program, Lynda heard about the program through Extension and was inspired by Ellen Denler's enthusiasm for native plants and the principles of C@H, so she decided to get involved and incorporate the concepts into her home landscape. By July 2025, she was ready to have her yard evaluated and certified. Then in the Fall, Lynda embarked on Master Naturalist training to enhance her knowledge of the natural world and conservation education.

At the start, their yard consisted of mostly lawn, highlighted by landscaped beds and several mature trees. The beds contained some shrubs and flowers which Lynda has curated to showcase her interests. One of her favorite things is planting sunflowers and leaving them out for the finches. Organically over the last five years, Lynda has incorporated native plants into her home landscape. Lynda stresses the importance of challenging the status quo and embracing the chaos of native plants.

Demonstrating that it's rather easy to do, Lynda has integrated native plants into her existing beds. She still has plants that aren't natives, because she enjoys them for their other properties, but she now has a trained eye and a different perspective. New wildlife visitors have been a welcome benefit of the new landscape. Undoubtedly, they visit for the park-like setting, the shade of the large trees, a meal from a flower or a feeder or a quick dip in the lake. Last season, 2025 marked the first time she's seen a monarch caterpillar on the property. In addition to caterpillars and butterflies, Lynda says that the natives have made their yard a host to so many more lightning bugs and a larger variety of insects and birds. She has spotted Northern Flickers, Indigo Bunting and Kingfisher along with a Great Blue Heron stopping over on the lake.

Resuming the previous homeowner's practice, at first Jeff and Lynda maintained the lawn with chemicals to continue achieving a uniform look free of weeds and dandelions. A practice the couple no longer adheres to, but that Lynda says was one of the main challenges, changing their mindset about expectations for their lawn and yard. Once enemy invaders, dandelions and clovers now take up residence with ease. In addition to the elimination of chemicals and the introduction of native plants, they've added bird feeders to help supplement food sources in the winter and a rain barrel to help aid in refreshing the containers and beds. Lynda also collects kitchen scraps and composts them to utilize in the garden.

Lynda Sharp-Lower ~ Member Spotlight Cont.

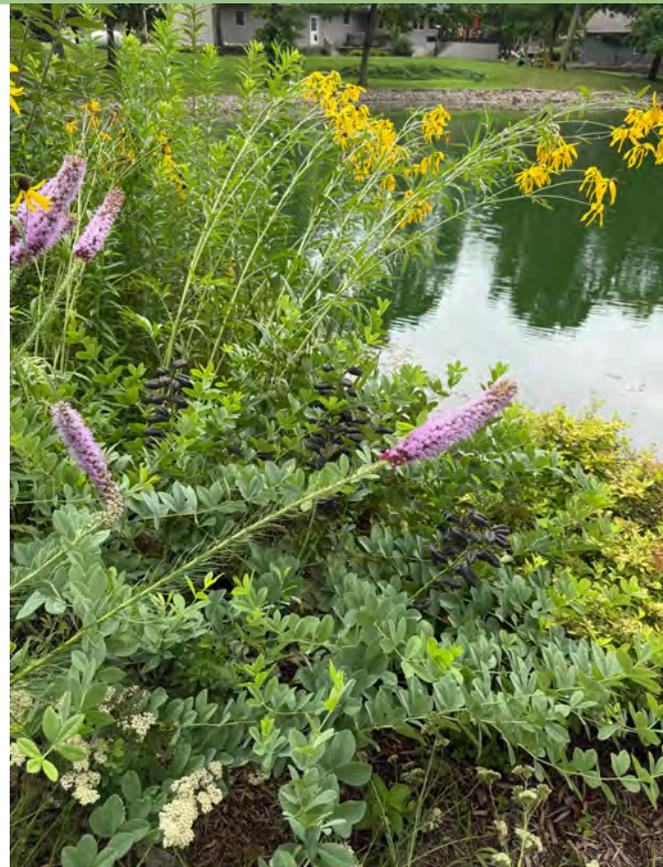
A second challenge has been the sun factor, since natives tend to enjoy more time basking in it and Lynda and Jeff have so many trees, it can often be hard to come by. They have chosen to utilize prime sun areas for new native plantings though, an example being a bed they started on the edge of the lake. Home to some snake visitors, it is also highlighted with some of Lynda's favorite natives, like Missouri Ironweed. Fall 2025 brought a new 20ft by 30ft site that they hope to develop into a large native bed. Lynda is currently winter sowing seeds saved for this area, another part of the process where she has found joy. The area will house more of what's done well in their yard and what they enjoy, Missouri Ironweed and more milkweed to entice additional Monarch friends. For future, Lynda says they may research and explore adding more shade loving natives to diversify the areas enveloped by the trees. They are letting their yard evolve over time and adding something new each year. For the long-term goal, Lynda envisions having two raised vegetable beds with a canopy and the rest of the yard encompassed in native plants.

Though their property is part of an HOA, Lynda says they haven't had resistance from neighbors, mainly because they've seamlessly tied the native plants into the existing landscape. Some neighbors have asked questions about what they're doing, and Lynda has enjoyed sharing and explaining the C@H principles. Others have embraced their shared interests and been very encouraging and generous with sharing their knowledge.

Something that the couple now focuses on together, the new C@H endeavor has given Lynda and Jeff an opportunity to develop their yard with shared enthusiasm and interest, which has been one of the many highlights. On a recent road trip to South Carolina, Lynda was reading Doug Tallamy's *How Can I Help?: Saving Nature with Your Yard* and discussing it with Jeff. At one point in the book, Tallamy mentions one of the oldest oaks, the Angel Oak Tree located in John's Island, SC. Since they were traveling near it, Lynda and Jeff decided to take a day to seek it out and experience its presence first-hand. Another shared experience that has enriched their lives.

What's Lynda's advice to those considering native plants and conservation efforts at home? Don't be afraid, just try it out and keep at it. Talk to your fellow gardeners, Extension volunteers and attend C@H focused events. Be willing to try something new and if something doesn't work the first year, have patience and try again the 2nd or 3rd year.

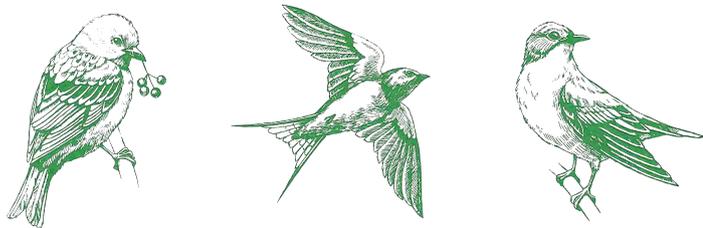
Sarah Smith, Master Naturalist & Master Gardener



New Conservation@Home Member



Jill Meints



Now that your yard is certified...

An attractive and functional yard that conserves water and provides habitat for birds, butterflies and other beneficial wildlife deserves some recognition! Your certified yard is an environmentally-friendly landscape through the Conservation@Home program and you have a sign to post proudly. When your neighbors see your sign and get curious, they will want to know how they can get a sign like that. Before you know it, yard by yard, you've brought more nature to your neighborhood.

We would love to see the Conservation@Home sign in your yard. Place your sign in a visible place on a t-post or sturdy wooden stake then get a picture. If you need assistance with getting your sign posted, please let us know.

Once you have your picture, we would love it if you would send it our way (email is usually the best and easiest way).

Open to sharing your conservation journey?

Let us know you are able to educate and inspire by emailing ainsleyo@illinois.edu and we'll get you on the path to being our next Member Spotlight!

Save the Dates for C@H 2026 Events



2026 is full of fun Conservation@Home Events to help promote the program and draw community support for our conservation efforts.

Be on the lookout for the email notifications with registrations for these events as they come available.

If you want to volunteer to support these events, please email Ainsley Olsen at ainsleyo@illinois.edu

C@H 2026 Kickoff Event

Morton Public Library

Saturday, June 13 ~ 9am to 11am

C@H Certified Garden Tour

Fulton County

Saturday, August 22 ~ 10am to 2pm

C@H Native Seed Swap

Peoria Library - North Branch

Thursday, October 29 ~ 5:30pm



Gardeners' BIG Day

go.illinois.edu/GBD26

Saturday, March 14, 2026
8 AM to 1 PM
Cuba High School

Registration

[online - go.illinois.edu/GBD26](http://go.illinois.edu/GBD26)

call - 309-547-3711

Fee: \$25 through deadline March 6



Gardeners, naturalists, and anyone interested in conservation are invited to Gardeners' BIG Day. Sessions are appropriate for attendees of all skill levels! The day includes three educational sessions, snacks, door prizes, and vendors. Sessions filled on a first-come, first-served basis. Spoon River Garden Club will be hosting their Silent Auction

Location

Cuba High School
20325 N State Rte 97
Cuba, IL 61427

Program Supporters



Green Connections: 2026 Meetings

March 5, 2026, 1 pm Morton Public Library
315 W Pershing St. Morton

Register: go.illinois.edu/GCseedsnation

Seeds of a Nation with Nicole Flowers Kimmerle. Join us as we explore the legacy of American Presidents and First Ladies through gardens, conservation, and environmental leadership. Registration required.

May 5, 2026, 10 am Jake Wolf Fish Hatchery
25410 Fish Hatchery Rd, Topeka

Register: go.illinois.edu/GCfishhatchery

Kayleigh Smith will lead a hatchery tour, explaining their vital work and process, with a close-up look at a variety of fish species that they hatch. Registration required.

July 9, 2026, 5:30 pm Lillie M. Evans Library
207 N Walnut Ave, Princeville

Register: go.illinois.edu/GCmycelium

Join Valerie Wolfe for an engaging class exploring the underground world of mycelium and its important role in natural systems. Registration required.

September 15, 2026, 5:30 pm, Parlin-Ingersoll Public Library
205 West Chestnut, Canton

Register: go.illinois.edu/GCcovercrop

Ethan Wieland of Saddle Butte Ag will share about how cover crops improve soil health, with practical takeaways you can use in your own garden. Registration required.

December 11, 2026, 10 am, Tazewell County Health Department
21306 IL-9, Tremont, IL 61568

Register: go.illinois.edu/GCyarend26

End of the Year Gathering Brunch. A time to enjoy each other's company and celebrate all of the accomplishments of 2026. Brunch will be catered for Master Volunteers and Conservation@Home Members! Registration required.

Other Upcoming Events

- **Down River Farm with Evan Barry**
March 23, 5:30pm - 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **Herbal Body Care with Janine Donahue**
March 24, 3pm - 1505 Valle Vista Blvd. Pekin
Register: go.illinois.edu/HerbalBodycare
- **Spring Ephemerals - Luthy Botanical Garden**
March 25, 4pm - 2520 N Prospect Rd, Peoria
- **Mindfulness Hike - Springdale Cemetery**
April 10, 9:30am - 3014 N Prospect Rd, Peoria
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessSpringdale26
- **Introduction to Nature Journaling - FPNC**
April 11, 10am - 15809 N Forest Park Dr,
Peoria Heights
Register: go.illinois.edu/naturejournalintro26
- **Watershed Stewardship - Thirkildsen Field Station**
April 15, 10am - 11316 N Prairie Rd, Lewistown
Register: go.illinois.edu/MNmeetWatersheds26
- **Wellness in Nature - Gentle Hatha Yoga**
April 16, 9am - 1200 Lakeland Park Dr, Canton
Register: go.illinois.edu/MGFultonYoga26
- **Floral Design - Wearable Art**
April 16, 1pm - 15411 IL-100, Lewistown
Register: go.illinois.edu/SpringFloral26
- **New Zealand's Flora And Fauna**
April 22, 4pm - 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria

- **Crop Rotation**
April 27, 5:30pm - 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **Mindfulness Hike - Carl Spindler Marina**
April 29, 9am - 3703 N Main St #7, East Peoria
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessCarlSpindler26
- **Plant Sale - Master Gardeners of Peoria County**
May 9, 8am to 12pm - 4700 N University St, Peoria
- **TCHD Compost Giveback**
May 9, 10am to 2pm - 21306 IL Route 9, Tremont
- **Forestry Workshop - Rice Lake**
May 13, 10am - 19721 US-24, Canton
- **Native Plant Bingo - Master Gardeners of Tazewell County**
May 18, 5:30pm - 601 N 4th St, Pekin
- **Wellness in Nature - Chair Yoga**
May 22, 9am - 1 College Dr, East Peoria
Register: go.illinois.edu/MGTazewellYoga26
- **Mindfulness Hike - Detweiller Riverside**
May 27, 9am - 8412 N Galena Rd, Peoria
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessDetweiller26
- **Make 'n Take Garden Art**
May 27, 4pm - 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria
- **Bus Trip to Chicago Botanic Garden**
June 26, 6am to 6:30pm - 4810 N Sheridan, Peoria
Register: go.illinois.edu/MGBusChicago26

2026 Master Volunteer Training Dates:

Master Gardener 2026 Training

June 8-12 ~ M-F ~ 9am to 4:30pm

Email ainsleyo@illinois.edu to be added to the interest list to be notified as soon as registration is available.

Master Naturalist 2026 Training

September 28-Oct 2 ~ M-F ~ 9am to 3pm

Email blc21@illinois.edu to be added to the interest list to be notified as soon as registration is available.

University of Illinois Extension, Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit Staff
extension.illinois.edu/fmpt 309-347-6614



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