

Conservation@Home

extension.illinois.edu/fmpt/conservationhome

shaping private and community landscapes in a conservation-minded way

Summer Newsletter

Discover how simple projects can make a lasting impact on your landscape and local environment. From creative recycling to larger improvements like hardscapes and rain gardens, small changes at home can support pollinators, improve water management, and enhance natural beauty. Explore this issue for practical ideas that turn your outdoor spaces into purposeful, sustainable habitats.



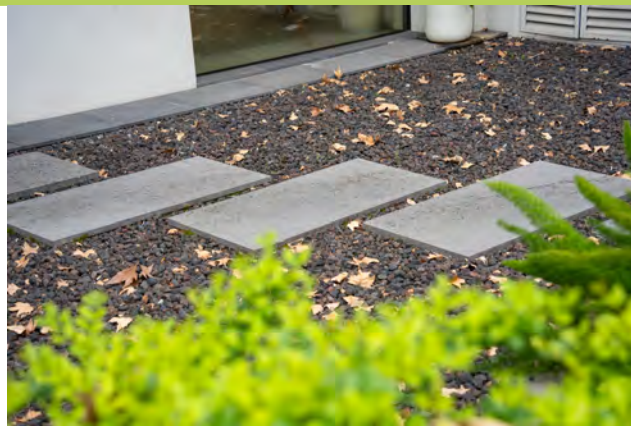
Upcycled Gardens

by Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator

Recycling household materials into garden features is a practical way to support pollinators while reducing waste. Many common items such as tin cans, glass jars, plastic containers, and scrap wood can be adapted into structures that provide food, water, and shelter for beneficial insects. Pollinators like native bees, butterflies, and beetles rely on small habitat features to survive, especially in residential areas where natural spaces may be limited.

Several simple projects can help meet these needs. Hollow stems or drilled wooden blocks placed inside reused containers can serve as nesting sites for solitary bees. Shallow dishes or lids filled with water and small stones create safe hydration stations by allowing insects to land without the risk of drowning. Recycled containers can also be used as planters for nectar-rich flowers such as coneflowers, black-eyed Susans, and milkweed, which provide essential food sources throughout the growing season.

Incorporating these features into your yard can improve pollinator health and increase biodiversity over time. When designing these projects, it is important to place them in sunny, sheltered areas and to avoid using pesticides nearby. By thoughtfully repurposing materials and arranging them with pollinators in mind, homeowners can create functional and environmentally beneficial garden spaces that contribute to local conservation efforts.



Rethinking Hardscapes for Conservation

by Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator

Larger outdoor projects provide an opportunity to make lasting improvements that support both your property and the environment. Traditional hardscape features like solid concrete pads and compacted surfaces often prevent water from soaking into the ground, leading to runoff and erosion. By choosing permeable materials such as paver stones, gravel pathways, or permeable pavers, homeowners can allow rainwater to filter naturally into the soil, reducing strain on local waterways and helping replenish groundwater.

Permeable pathways and patios are excellent starting points for homeowners looking to make a meaningful change. Replacing or redesigning a concrete walkway with spaced pavers set in gravel or sand allows water to pass through while maintaining a stable surface. Patios can be constructed with permeable paver systems that include a layered base to improve infiltration. For driveways or larger areas, grid-style pavers filled with gravel or turf provide a durable option that reduces runoff while still handling regular use. These upgrades not only improve drainage but also create a softer, more natural look that blends with surrounding landscapes.

Beyond pathways and patios, homeowners can explore larger design features that actively manage water across their property. Dry creek beds made with river rock can be shaped to capture and direct rainwater away from structures while slowing its movement. Shallow swales lined with native grasses or pollinator-friendly plants can further absorb and filter runoff. Retaining walls built with natural stone can help control erosion on slopes while creating planting pockets for native species. Even small courtyards or seating areas can be designed with integrated planting zones that collect and use rainwater rather than shedding it.

Hardscape projects can also be designed to support habitat and biodiversity. Leaving small gaps between stones or pavers provides space for ground-nesting bees, while incorporating flat rocks in sunny areas creates basking spots for butterflies and other insects. Edging hardscape features with native plant beds adds food sources and shelter, helping to connect built elements with living habitat. By approaching these larger projects with water management and ecological function in mind, homeowners can create spaces that are not only durable and attractive, but also beneficial to pollinators and the broader environment.

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

Building Better Soil with Sheet Mulching

by Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator

Creating a new garden bed does not have to involve digging or disturbing existing soil. Sheet mulching and solarization are two effective methods that allow homeowners to prepare planting areas while protecting the beneficial organisms already living underground. By leaving the soil structure intact, these approaches support mycelium networks, improve moisture retention, and build healthier conditions for long-term plant growth.

Sheet mulching is a simple, layered process that mimics natural decomposition. To begin, choose a site and remove any large debris, then cover the area with a layer of cardboard or several sheets of newspaper to block sunlight and suppress existing vegetation. These materials are permeable, allowing water and air to move through while gradually breaking down over time. Additional layers of organic material such as compost, leaves, grass clippings, or mulch are then added on top. As the layers decompose, they enrich the soil and create a nutrient-rich planting bed. In many cases, planting can be done directly through the sheet mulch by cutting small openings in the top layers, allowing for immediate installation of native plants.

Solarization offers an alternative for areas with persistent weeds or when a more rapid reset is needed. This method involves covering the soil with clear plastic during the hottest part of the summer, allowing sunlight to heat the ground and reduce weed seeds and pathogens. While it temporarily limits soil activity near the surface, it can be a practical option for preparing new beds that will later be planted with native species. Some gardeners are finding creative ways to apply this method, including Gayle Blodgett, MG/MN, who solarizes new round beds by flipping a trampoline over the area. This approach highlights another opportunity to repurpose existing materials while achieving effective results.

Both approaches provide practical, scalable options for homeowners looking to establish new planting areas with conservation in mind. Whether you are expanding a pollinator bed or replacing sections of turf, these methods help retain soil health while reducing labor and long-term maintenance. By planning ahead and selecting the right technique for your space, you can create a strong foundation for native plants and a more resilient landscape.



Native Plant Spotlight: Bottlebrush Grass (*Elymus hystrix*)

by Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator

Bottlebrush grass (*Elymus hystrix*) is a versatile native species that brings texture and movement to partially shaded landscapes. Growing in loose, upright clumps that reach three to five feet tall, this perennial grass is well-suited for woodland edges and shaded garden spaces. Its most distinctive feature is its long, slender seed heads, which emerge in summer and resemble the shape of a bottlebrush, adding visual interest well into the season.

Beyond its unique appearance, bottlebrush grass provides important ecological benefits. It serves as a host plant for caterpillars, supporting the life cycle of native butterflies and moths. As these insects develop, they become a valuable food source for birds and other wildlife, helping to strengthen the broader ecosystem. This grass thrives in medium-moisture soils and partial shade, making it an excellent choice for areas where many flowering plants may struggle.

Bottlebrush grass is also a practical option for homeowners looking to expand native plantings with minimal maintenance. It establishes readily from seed, has few pest or disease concerns, and blends well with other shade-tolerant natives. Consider incorporating it into new garden beds created through sheet mulching or pairing it with hardscape edges to soften pathways and seating areas. By adding this adaptable native grass to your landscape, you can enhance habitat value while introducing a subtle, natural beauty to your outdoor space.



Find further information at: go.illinois.edu/BottlebrushGrass

C@H Member Spotlight: Meg Ray

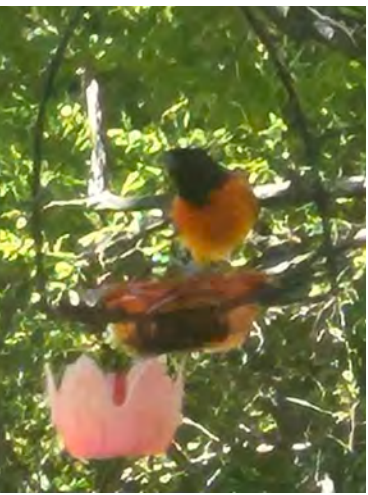
by Sarah Smith, Master Naturalist & Master Gardener

Utilizing the 2025 Conservation@Home Kickoff event at Pleasant Prairie Nursery as a catalyst, Meg Ray has quickly gained momentum in her C@H journey. Almost immediately following the event, she had her yard certified, began incorporating more C@H principles into her home landscape and signed up to learn more about nature and conservation through the Extension Master Naturalist training. Though not a requirement of being a C@H member, Meg says that naturalist education was a clear progression and included the values of community, connection and stewardship that she has been cultivating since childhood.

Growing up with grandparents who shared their love of nature through farming and gardening, to sustain their family and the plants and animals, Meg carries on those traditions. In her words, “nature is embedded in the soul” and she makes connecting to the natural world a priority and daily starting point.

It’s evident that her love of birds was fostered early on as she describes always having them in mind when gardening and designing her landscapes, including at her current home where she has a bird bath, multiple feeders, and has plans to add a feeding station in the middle of the garden this year. In addition to a squirrel resistant feeder and a solar fountain, the feeding station will highlight plants that the birds will be able to enjoy and utilize throughout the seasons, including native grasses and coneflowers and some non-natives that she, the birds and pollinators enjoy, like zinnias and cosmos.

Less than a year into having a certified yard, Meg continues to be a passionate steward, greeting her garden everyday with purpose and enthusiasm. At the start, while learning more about invasive species, she removed burning bush and barberry from her yard. To continue, she plans to remove the Rose of Sharon from her rose bush garden and add a spicebush and curly leaf parsley for the caterpillars and butterflies. She will also be extending her native garden bed with plants she winter-sowed, a process



Meg Ray ~ Member Spotlight Cont.

and butterflies. She will also be extending her native garden bed with plants she winter-sowed, a process she was introduced to through C@H.

Hopefully her first time efforts of winter sowing will yield great results, reducing the need to purchase plants and providing an inventory of the many plants and variety needed for her native bed expansion. As she described starting out by buying only one of every native plant of interest to her at the kickoff event last year, Meg laughed as she stated she now knows that providing plants of the same type in groups of three helps to create balance in the garden and a landing area for pollinators. The bed extension is located along a hillside that meets a wooded area at the back of her property, where she enjoys seeing spring ephemerals and in return, she removes invasives like garlic mustard and honeysuckle.

In addition to nurturing the birds and pollinators, Meg shares her knowledge with her neighbors, adults and children alike, encouraging them to be stewards themselves through daily interactions and a shared space that is part of her property. One example being that she taught the children about littering and its effects in her yard after they enjoyed some popsicle treats that she provided. Meg also continues to grow into the role of Master Naturalist volunteer and finds events like the Greater Peoria Farm Show and Sun Foundation events to be especially fun, while also being an opportunity to share about C@H and conservation practices.

Her advice for those considering incorporating Conservation@Home principles in their home landscape is to be accepting of the native landscape and to be curious about how it will develop. She says it isn't hard to make small changes, but you also need the desire to do so. She finds it fulfilling to know that the changes you make can positively impact everything in and around your landscape, while also extending its effects beyond, to your neighbors and community.



New Conservation@Home Members



Bethany Gschwind



Robert & Patti Thayer

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 More C@H Events!

Conservation@Home Events 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 Winter Sowing
U of I Extension, Tazewell Branch

Tuesday, December 15, 2026 ~ 5:30pm

C@H Garden Planning Social
U of I Extension, Peoria Branch

Tuesday, January 12, 2027 ~ 4pm



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Kickoff Event 2026

Saturday, June 13 ~ 9:30 to 11am

Hosted by Morton Public Library

315 W Pershing St, Morton
mortonlibrary.org



Join us at Morton Public Library to kick off the season with Conservation@Home education, tours of the Native Garden Beds, refreshments and networking with other conservation enthusiasts!



University of Illinois Extension
Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit
Ainsley Olsen, Horticulture Program Coordinator
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- 9:30-10am ~ Native Garden Tours & Plant Identification
- 10-10:15am ~ Conservation@Home Introduction
- 10:15-10:30am ~ Conservation@Home Upcoming Events
- 10:30-11am ~ Native Garden Tours & Plant Recommendations



Learn more about Conservation@Home.
go.illinois.edu/ConservationHomeWestCentralll

Open House - Come at any time during the event. The first 15 people who complete a C@H application during the Kickoff Event will be gifted with a free native plant courtesy of Pleasant Prairie Nursery.

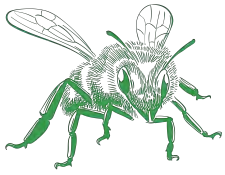




Garden Tour 2026

Saturday, August 22 ~ 10am to 2pm

Hosted by Conservation@Home Certified Yards
in Fulton County



Join us for a day of viewing beautiful gardens already certified by the Conservation@Home program. You will be able to view other approaches to conservation to plan for your own ecologically-minded landscape!

University of Illinois Extension
Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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This is a self-guided tour where you will be going to different C@H Certified yards at your own pace. All gardens on this tour are located in Fulton County. Locations will be sent out to registered attendees.



Registration:

go.illinois.edu/CHTour26



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Learn more about Conservation@Home.
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Autumn Abundance: Native Seed & Plant Swap



[go.illinois.edu/
NativeSwap26](http://go.illinois.edu/NativeSwap26)



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Start saving your seeds and splitting your natives to share! All seeds and plants should be labeled. We'll have a potluck buffet, please bring your favorite dish.



**Thursday,
October 29, 2026
5:30pm**



**Peoria Public Library North Branch
3001 West Grand Parkway,
Peoria, IL 61615**

There's a nocturnal creature costume contest to give you a sneak peek of upcoming programs! Wear themed outfit or full costume & vote for the best to win a prize!

If you need reasonable accommodation to attend, please contact Ainsley Olsen at 309-547-3711.





Illinois
Master
Naturalist



Master Naturalist Training 2026

The Master Naturalist 5-Day Program, starting **September 28 through October 2**, is an immersive training that will introduce you to the natural history, ecosystems, and conservation work of Illinois. Through hands-on learning, field experiences, and expert instruction, you will build skills in observing, understanding, and caring for local environments while preparing to serve their communities through volunteer stewardship and education.

Training Topics include Anthropology, Archeology, Entomology, Geology, Herpetology, Mammalogy, Natural Divisions, Soils, Prairies, and Wetlands!

To Register, please visit us at:
go.illinois.edu/mn26

Or scan the QR Code:



For more information or reasonable accommodation requests please contact:
Brittany Chambers, Natural Resources Coordinator
Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit
BLC21@illinois.edu | 309-547-3711



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Green Connections: 2026 Meetings

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/GCyearend26

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.

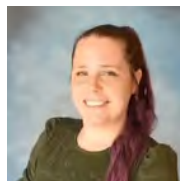
Other Upcoming Events

- **Fern ID Hike - Mike McGraw**
June 3, 8am - Spring Creek Preserve
Register: go.illinois.edu/fernhike
- **Nature Journaling: Field Sketching**
June 6, 10am - Quail Meadow, Jubilee
Register: go.illinois.edu/journal2
- **Bioblitz @ Chautauqua Natl. Wildlife Refuge**
June 15, 10am - 19031 E CR 2110N, Havana
Register: go.illinois.edu/MNJune26
- **Mindfulness Hike - Sandridge State Forest**
June 17, 9am - 25779 E Cty Rd 2300 N, Forest City
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessSandRidge26
- **Grow-A-Row - TCHD WIC Garden**
June 22, 5:30pm - 21306 IL-9, Tremont
- **Tree ID Walk - Donovan Park, Peoria**
June 24, 5pm - 5805 Knoxville Ave, Peoria
- **Bus Trip to Chicago Botanic Garden - June 26**
- **Mindfulness Hike - Emiquon Nature Preserve**
July 15, 9am - 11304 North Prairie Road, Lewistown
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessEmiquon26
- **Summer Floral Design - Flowers & Fruit**
July 17, 1pm - 15411 IL-100, Lewistown
Register: go.illinois.edu/SummerFloral26
- **little Gardener's BIG Day - ICC East Peoria**
July 21, 9am to 11:30am - Demonstration Garden
- **Wellness in Nature - Gentle Hatha Yoga**
July 24, 9am - Havana River Park
Register: go.illinois.edu/MGMasonYoga26
- **Mindfulness Hike - Farmdale Reservoir**
July 25, 10am - 810 W Bittersweet Rd, Washington
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessFarmdale26
- **First Ladies Gardens - Ellen Denler**
July 27, 5:30pm - 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **Nature Journaling: Watercolors**
July 29, 9am - Emiquon Nature Preserve
Register: go.illinois.edu/journal3
- **Summer Garden Visit - ICC East Peoria**
July 29, 4:30pm - Demonstration Garden
- **Ignite Peoria! - Interactive STEM**
August 8, 9am to 5pm - Peoria Civic Center
- **Fantastic Fungi - Movie & Book Night**
August 14, 6pm - 15411 IL-100, Lewistown
- **Leaf Castings - Ella Maxwell**
August 24, 5:30pm - 1505 Valle Vista Blvd, Pekin
- **Mindfulness Hike - Spring Creek Preserve**
August 26, 9am - Lot off of Spring Creek Road
Register: go.illinois.edu/MindfulnessSpringCreek26
- **Summer Garden Tour- Jubilee Butterfly Garden**
August 26, 5pm - Jubilee State Park, near Historic Site

University of Illinois Extension, Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit Staff
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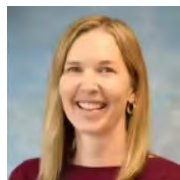
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