

We save land. We save rivers.



# CONSERVATION@HOME

Celebrating 20 Years



Liz Ambrogli's Conservation@Home-certified yard in Elmhurst

## 20 Years of

# Conservation@Home

Over the past two decades, our Conservation@Home Program Director Jim Kleinwachter has been able to see the program born out of his desire to encourage people's environmentally-minded efforts grow to become one of our pillar programs, expand into a regional initiative carried out by other conservation organizations, and transform the landscapes of not only residential homes but corporate campuses, schools, municipal buildings, and entire developments.

The Conservation Foundation's Conservation@Home and Conservation@Work programs encourage and empower individuals to make meaningful environmental impacts in their own yards and green spaces by meeting them wherever they are at in their experience and knowledge level. From implementing sustainable gardening practices to creating wildlife habitats, we provide the advice, resources, and expertise to transform any outdoor space, even an apartment balcony, into a sanctuary for biodiversity.

By embracing a broader ecosystem and landscape approach to conservation where humans share habitats with wildlife, not only in protected areas but also in areas of everyday life, we create a significant positive

impact. Yards and green spaces throughout the Chicagoland region that are landscaped with native plants support wildlife, provide clean water and clean air, and conserve the region's biodiversity. This creates a matrix of healthy natural spaces throughout our communities, linking private naturally landscaped areas with larger publicly owned parks and forest preserves to help wildlife thrive and increase our local ecosystems' resilience to climate change through direct and tangible actions. From increasing stormwater absorption at home during major rainfall events to creating a mosaic of microhabitats that can support wildlife migration in the age of climate change, homeowners are helping the environment while providing healthy and beautiful outdoor spaces for wildlife, people, and pets. Each garden becomes a critical piece of a larger ecological puzzle, restoring and reconnecting natural systems one yard at a time.

The hallmark of Conservation@Home is personal attention in the form of individual site visits conducted by our staff, where they can *oooo* and *abbbb* over the creative conservation measures landowners have already put in place, and recommend ways to further their efforts and increase habitat, water conservation, beauty, and biodiversity.



Chris & Nissa's native plant garden in Aurora

**Content & Editing:** Jill Johnson

**Design:** Lea Rodbarry

**Photography Credits:** Photos were taken by staff of The Conservation Foundation and Conservation@Home-certified homeowners.

## Humanity for Habitat + Native Plant of the Year!

Habitat loss and degradation are the main reasons we're seeing a huge drop in biodiversity all over the globe. But a new study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service suggests that a "Humanity for Habitat" approach to managing our own yards could help ease some of the pressure on wildlife. Not only could this be good news for animals, but it could also boost climate resilience and improve our own living environments. This lines up perfectly with what our Conservation@Home program has been advocating for for the past 20 years—encouraging people to make

small, sustainable changes in their yards and green spaces that support the local ecosystem instead of taking away from it.

We're excited to join others in highlighting "Humanity for Habitat" as a key focus of our program. To celebrate, we're launching a new Native Plant of the Year feature. Each year, we'll spotlight a different native plant and share fascinating facts about its importance throughout the growing season.

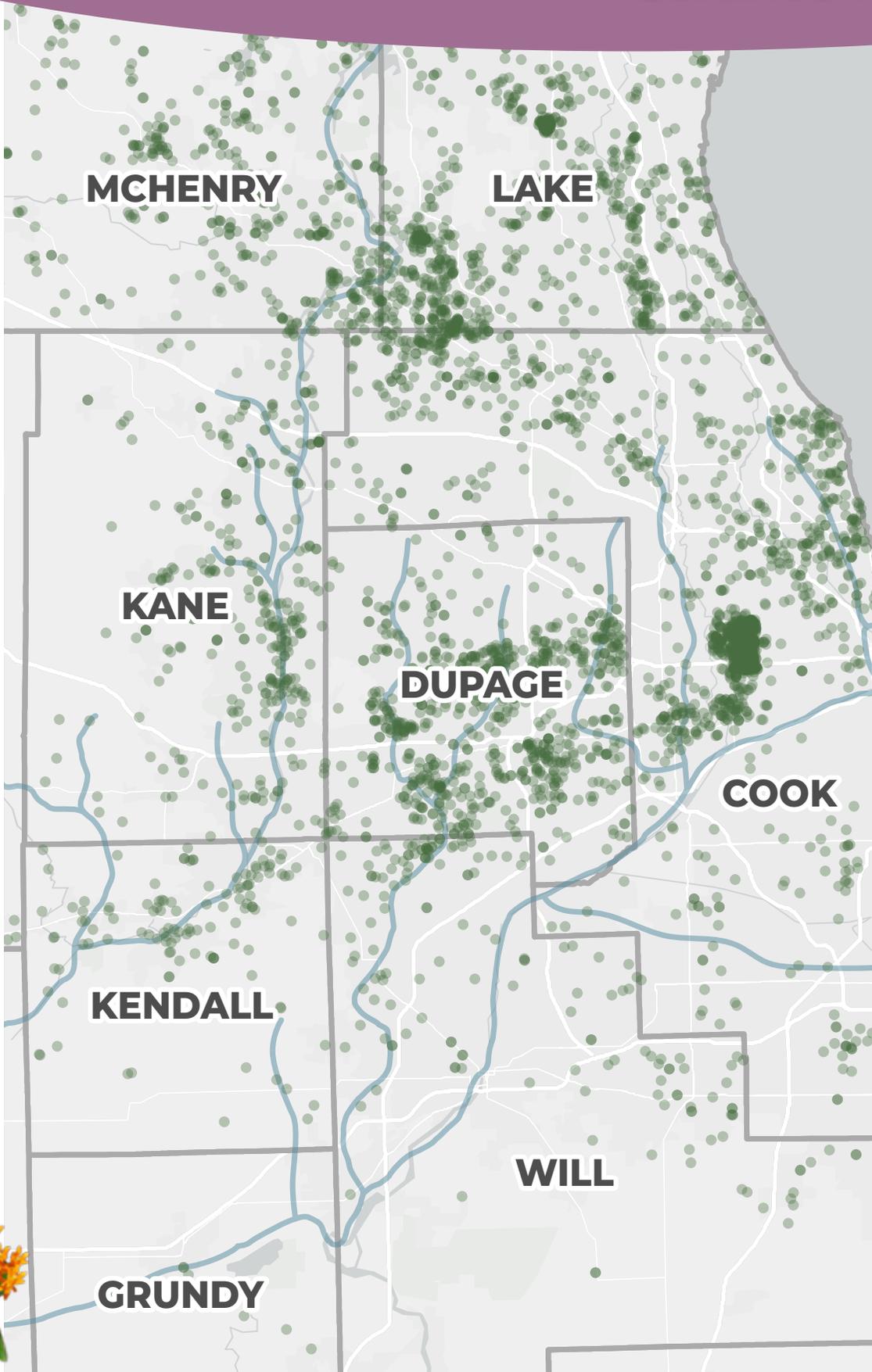
This year's Native Plant of the Year is **Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)!**

A fan favorite, Butterfly Milkweed wins hearts with its vibrant orange blooms and its important role in supporting our beloved monarch butterflies. Stay tuned as we've got some neat swag items featuring the Plant of the Year, as well as fun Butterfly Milkweed tidbits coming your way throughout 2025.



# Conservation@Home

## Certified Properties



### *A Tapestry of Nearby Nature*

These dots represent properties given Conservation@Home certification by The Conservation Foundation and our partner organizations. This tapestry of nearby nature connects natural spaces within and between our communities. The following Conservation@Home Regional Partners spread the program and its impact beyond our service territory:

- University of Illinois Extension Cook County & the Forest Preserves of Cook County
- Openlands
- University of Illinois Extension Fulton, Mason, Peoria, Tazewell Counties
- The Land Conservancy of McHenry County
- Natural Land Institute
- Heartland Conservancy
- Geneva Lakes Conservancy
- The Little Forks Conservancy

If your organization would like to become a Conservation@Home Regional Partner, email [deproots@theconservationfoundation.org](mailto:deproots@theconservationfoundation.org)!

# Spotlighting Local Landscapes

## DUPAGE COUNTY

### Melissa & Adam Schmitz

Melissa and Adam Schmitz of Lombard have been working diligently for two years to turn their one-acre lot into a wildlife sanctuary. The transformation has been so dramatic that they were featured on our DuPage Garden Showcase of Conservation@Home-certified properties this past summer! Melissa and Adam have removed literally hundreds of buckthorn trees and have planted more than 200 beneficial trees, including several kinds of oaks, bald cypress, river birch, tulip poplar, and a few pines. Additionally, they've planted plugs of over 500 wildflowers and sedges (100 of those were from

The Conservation Foundation's Earth Day Benefit Dinner Silent Auction), and have seeded like crazy. They also planted many shrubs such as spicebush, button bush, witch hazel, and wild black currant. Since creating their little oasis, they've seen a huge increase in the number and types of wildlife that have visited their yard – including crawfish, great horned owls, bats, and a mink!

**Header image:** Melissa and Adam's backyard garden in bloom.

**To the right,** Melissa and Adam receive their Conservation@Home certification and sign, and Adam removes hundreds of invasive buckthorn trees.



## WILL COUNTY

### Ellen Green, Wild Birds Unlimited Joliet

Ellen Green, the owner of Wild Birds Unlimited Joliet, has really lived out Conservation@Work! Her storefront is located at the corner of a strip mall, which does not conjure up images of nature, but she has converted an open space adjacent to the strip mall into a bird and pollinator-friendly natural space. Over the last couple of years, she has ripped out invasive plants

**To the left,** Ellen turned an unused strip mall space into a thriving native garden for birds and pollinators—earning her Conservation@Work certification!

and planted many native varieties, and most recently has put a contractor to work to execute her full native garden vision. On the other side of this garden is the Rock Run Forest Preserve, and Ellen has been coordinating her restoration efforts with those of the Forest Preserve District of Will County and Will County Audubon. Ellen is passionate about microhabitat programs, and is pursuing certifications from all organizations that offer them so that her customers can learn about how to make bird and pollinator-friendly gardens at home too, and she also hosts in-store educational events. She often asks for Conservation@Home and Conservation@Work brochures that she can hand out to customers as well.



KENDALL COUNTY

**Chris Yanos**

Chris Yanos of Oswego received a tremendous reward for the work he and his girlfriend Tammy have put into their property near the Fox River when a rare Rufous hummingbird chose their yard for an extended stay this past fall! While it is the most common hummingbird in Alaska, this tiny visitor with reddish-brown feathers and vivid patches of red, green, or orange is a decidedly uncommon sight here in Illinois, as evidenced by the local birders who flocked to Chris and Tammy’s yard to see their special guest.



Rufous hummingbird

This Rufous hummingbird was no doubt attracted to the property by the wide variety of native plants incorporated into the landscaping, which provide a rich nectar source for birds and pollinators, as well as shelter for other insects and wildlife. Additional frequent visitors Chris and Tammy enjoy seeing include wood ducks, raptors, and melodious songbirds. Chris grows many of his own native plants from seed and has put special effort into cultivating less common varieties.

Chris’s colorful blooms offer an appetizing buffet for birds, bees, butterflies, and more! Pictured to the left, a monarch butterfly sips nectar from a blazing star, while below, a hummingbird moth enjoys visiting bee balm.

KANE COUNTY

**Sara Simon and Scott Murray**

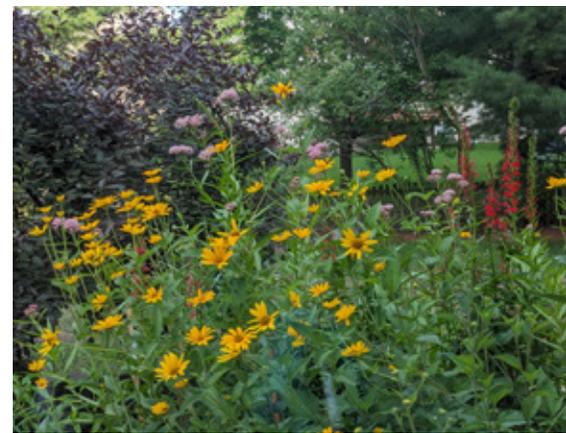
Sara Simon and Scott Murray of Geneva have transformed their typical subdivision lot into a colorful, buzzing oasis for nature, educating their neighborhood in the process, but they’ve had to put up a little fight along the way! Their well-designed gardens follow what they call “the mullet approach” – their front gardens are more formal and structured, while in the back yard, it’s a wild party. Sara shared that for more natural plant placement in the back, they toss pebbles and put a plant where they land. They track what blooms when so they can fill in the gaps to have seasonal coverage with new plantings, and have also made their budget go farther by growing their own native plants from seed and doing winter seed sowing. To educate their neighbors on the benefits of their native landscaping approach, they put a sign in their front yard with a QR code to a website where they share pictures, knowledge, and lessons learned. All of their hard work has brought beauty to their neighborhood and made them the favored stop of dragonflies, birds, butterflies, and fireflies. But it hasn’t been all sunshine and Butterfly Milkweed! When their subdivision’s developer (of 20 years ago) ordered them to remove their



native gardens, Sara and Scott successfully utilized legislation passed last year, the 2024 Homeowner’s Native Landscape Act, to keep their legal right to native plantings in residential areas.

“We’ve found great joy in watching things grow and supporting the environment and wildlife around us,” Sara said. “And it has been wonderful for meeting neighbors and building community. We even gave trick-or-treaters Milkweed seeds with their Halloween candy, which created much excitement!”

Learn more at <https://smsimonmho.wixsite.com/smnativegarden>



Sara and Scott’s “mullet approach” balances neat, traditional curb appeal with a more natural habitat in the backyard.

# Rain Barrels

***Did you know that around 40% of total household water used during the summer months is for watering lawns and gardens?***



Estimates indicate that a quarter-inch of rain falling on an average home yields over 200 gallons of water. Imagine if you could capture all of that water to offset what you need for your gardens, house plants, etc.? With rain barrels, you can! Rain barrels are simply large containers that help conserve stormwater from your roof that would otherwise be lost as runoff. Modern rain barrels are sealed, safe around children, and insect resistant – they can even be painted or decorated to your liking. You can divert water from your downspout to fill your rain barrel, and a hose spigot on the front makes the water easy to access and use.

Rainwater doesn't contain chlorine, lime, or calcium, which makes it ideal for watering your flowers and vegetable garden or washing your car or windows. You may notice a decrease in your water bill! And even if you don't have an intended use for the water, emptying the rain barrel after a storm reduces the rate and volume of stormwater the sewer system and our rivers and streams have to manage at a peak time, which is a win for water quality!

The Conservation Foundation sells rain barrels, also known as water barrels, year-round through our partnership with Upcycle Products, Inc. Our 55-gallon rain barrels are made of recycled food-grade plastic, come in a variety of colors and can be purchased for \$69.50 (plus tax) for pick-up at our McDonald Farm headquarters in Naperville (home delivery is available for \$42.50 more).

**Scan this QR code to learn more and order your rain barrel today!**



# Take the Next Step in Your Conservation@Home Journey

Wherever you may be on your Conservation@Home journey, are you ready to take this relationship to the next level? Whether you're just starting out, are ready to get your yard Conservation@Home-certified, or have been certified for years but want to keep learning and sharing your love of native plants, there's a place for you here!

Here are the steps to certification:

**Step 1:** If you are interested in making your property a Conservation@Home-certified landscape, complete our interest form on our website, or scan the Interest Form QR code below.

**Step 2:** A member of our Conservation@Home staff will connect with you to ask some initial questions about your yard and what your goals are, whether it is to get advice on how to meet the Conservation@Home checklist criteria or if you feel that you are ready to have your yard certified. They will then schedule a time to come to your house to conduct a yard visit.

**Step 3:** Once you've had the chance to show off your native plantings, the water conservation practices you've employed and the other ways you are managing your property for the benefit of nature to our staff, they'll let you know if you qualify for certification. If you do, you'll get a yard sign signifying your participation in the program and recognizing your efforts to create an environmentally friendly landscape. The requested donation for the program is \$25.00 for current members of The Conservation Foundation. For non-members, a \$50.00 donation will award participation in the Conservation@Home program as well as a one-year membership to The Conservation Foundation.

*If you don't meet certification requirements right away:*

**Step 4:** You can implement the suggested sustainable improvements to your yard that were provided during your yard visit at your leisure. Once you feel you have accomplished the identified goals, you can set up another visit for our staff to come and certify your yard, whether it's a few months or a few years later!

Visit our website or scan the QR codes below for resources like garden designs, native plant guides, lists of local places to buy native plants and professionals who can design your dream native garden and/or install it, and more!

[www.theconservationfoundation.org/conservation-home](http://www.theconservationfoundation.org/conservation-home)



Annette and Nino's backyard garden, West Chicago



Kim's backyard garden next to the DuPage River, Naperville



Anita's front yard Conservation@Home sign, Wheaton

Scan these QR codes for Conservation@Home Resources:



Conservation@Home Webpage



Interest Form



Certification Criteria



Professional Resources



2025 Plant Sale Info & Plant Lists



**The Conservation Foundation**

*We save land. We save rivers.*

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[www.theconservationfoundation.org](http://www.theconservationfoundation.org)



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## **McDonald Farm Plant Sale**

10s404 Knoch Knolls Rd, Naperville

**SATURDAY, MAY 10**

**9 AM - 1 PM**

Native flowers, grasses, trees & shrubs,  
vegetable & herb seedlings, rain barrels,  
organic compost, and more!

Learn more at

[www.theconservationfoundation.org/  
plant-sale](http://www.theconservationfoundation.org/plant-sale)

***Special Edition!***

# **Celebrating 20 Years of Conservation@Home**

