

## Turning Your Hell-Strip into a Heaven-Strip

Every morning, my daughter and I count the beneficial insects and pollinators in our tiny patch of Texas prairie that we planted in our hellstrip. A sleeping dragonfly perches atop a swollen bud of lanceleaf tickseed, morning dew formed in perfect drops on the tip of its wings. A bumblebee nestles in the petals of a maximilian sunflower, nectar-drunk. Mason bees dogfight over each and every tube flower of the penstemons, while a hummingbird enjoys its breakfast on some Mexican honeysuckle. All the while, a Carolina wren plucks small green caterpillars off a rigorously growing Fall aster for its fledglings, hiding underneath the leaves of forsythia sage.

We are inundated with devastating news of animal extinctions on a weekly basis: Insectpocalypse. Songbird population crashes (there are 3 billion less birds in the USA than there were in the 70s), the deforestation of the Amazon. It makes us wildlife and animal enthusiasts feel hopeless.

In the US, millions of acres of habitat have been destroyed and replaced with ecological deserts where almost nothing lives: lawns.

We love our lawns, with their green blankets of grass-blades surrounding our homes, verdant displays of classic Americana. And with current inflation and our worsening North Texas drought, who doesn't love our ever escalating water bills?

But it turns out that we can all easily do our part to stem this wildlife destruction by preserving or replacing a small patch of our hell-strip - that useless patch of lawn between the sidewalk and street curb - with Texas natives.

Though my wife and I replaced a 60 foot stretch of our hellstrip with Texas native "prairie", just replacing 2x2 feet of this "lawn" with native plants will dramatically help our pollinators, caterpillars, and the birds that they support.



The Curb Garden, April 2022

### **Not All Plants Are Created Equal:**

According to research done by the National Wildlife Federation ([nwf.com](http://nwf.com)) and the work of esteemed entomologist, Doug Tallamy at the University of Delaware, perennials like Goldenrods (*Solidago*), Asters (*Symphyotrichum*), and Sunflowers (*Helianthus*) can support dozens of bees and caterpillars who provide songbird parents with food for their young, and the seeds to get them through winter - all while multiplying your flowers! And of course who doesn't love attracting monarch butterflies in the Spring and Fall with NATIVE milkweeds (*Asclepius*). Here are a few plants we have bought from local nurseries for our hell-strip.

- Red Columbine
- Texas Gold Columbine
- Forsythia Sage
- Woodland Aster
- Fall Aster
- Goldenrod
- Lanceleaf Coreopsis
- Texas Primrose
- Missouri Primrose
- Purple Coneflower
- White Coneflower
- Maximilian Sunflower
- Black Eyed Susan

- Calamagrostis Grass
- Blond Ambition Gramma Grass
- Creeping Phlox
- Swamp Milkweed
- Giant Coneflower
- Gulf Coast Penstemon
- Texas Sedge
- Cherokee Sedge



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### **How To Do It**

The best time of year to do this transformation is Spring (March) or Fall (October) as it's not hot. Planting when it's cooler during the day will give your plants run-room to focus on growing deep roots which will save their lives from our brutal Summer heat and dry season. I only water my plants the first week I plant - no sprinklers, no hose, the whole patch lives on rain alone!

There are two ways to do this. If you are into fitness, you can do it yourself: simply lift the grass out using either a shovel or a pick-axe and carry that dirt away. Fill in the space level with top soil (NOT compost - as most of these plants prefer our alkaline native clay soil.) Then plant away, using 3, 5, or 7 of the same plants at a time. Honestly even one aster, one coneflower,

and one goldenrod would work, as they will reseed themselves freely while also providing pollen, nectar, and seeds to native insects and birds.

Or, just ask your landscaper, lawn service, etc to do it for you :)

**A few of my favorite resources:**

Read this book: Bringing Nature Home, Douglas W. Tallamy, Timber Press, 2009

Check out this site: Native Plant Finder, [www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder](http://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder)

Happy Gardening!

Ricky