



Homegrown National Parks

The U.S. has 433 national parks (though only 63 are called that; the others have names like National Monument, Seashore, or Recreational Area), encompassing 85 million acres. That seems like a lot, but it's less than 4% of the 2.26 billion acres we call home. Six are located in Connecticut, at least in part—the Appalachian Trail, National Scenic Trail, and National Historic Trail all dip into our state—and we have a generous number (142) of state parks and forests. Even so, the patchwork of state and federal parklands isn't extensive enough to support our native wildlife. What to do?

Enter the National Homegrown Parks (HNP), a plan for individual homeowners to make up the difference:

Our National Parks, no matter how grand in scale, are too small and separated from one another to preserve (native) species to the levels needed. Thus, the concept for Homegrown National Park, a bottom-up call-to-action to restore habitat where we live and work, and to a lesser extent where we farm and graze, extending national parks to our yards and communities.

Ironically, it was only a century ago that homeowners were encouraged to plant their front yards with acres of lawn, so as to create the feel of extended parklands, in the style Victorian landscape architects admired. Today, we understand that 40 million acres of lawn, together with the introduction of many non-native plants and the use of chemical herbicides and insecticides, have created a biodiversity crisis. We're losing large and growing numbers of species, and as Doug Tallamay puts it, nature is not optional. With the loss of so many contributing species, we are poised to destroy the careful balance that gives us clean air and water, natural flood control, pollination for food, and carbon storage to help cool our planet. We need a very different concept of "park."

Everyone needs to pitch in, but you can do it according to your spare time, energy, and resources. Start small: grow just one native species. Leave some part of your lawn unmown. Instead of hauling away fallen branches and leaf litter, leave some in an inconspicuous corner as a mini-wildlife refuge. Isn't it wonderful to feel virtuous about doing less yard work?

It costs nothing to turn off night lighting, and very little to at least put it on timers or point the lights down, to protect insects and migrating birds, and you will probably

notice more fireflies next summer. Maybe you can't afford to buy oak saplings, but you can plant a few acorns. You'll be surprised how quickly they grow.

With more energy and resources, you can become more ambitious. Replant a section of lawn with native species. Change your mindset: Instead of admiring a swath of uniform green, see the beauty in different shapes and textures of native grasses, and appreciate the inconspicuous flowers so vital to pollinators, especially in the early spring months before your flower garden gets going.

Before it gets too hot, spend some time removing invasives. My focus is on bittersweet and barberry; yours could be privet or the dreaded Japanese knotweed. Don't kid yourself: eradication of invasives is hard work, and may require repeating over several years. But every inch of soil where an invasive used to be becomes an opportunity to introduce a native back into your personal ecosystem.

A few homeowners will be committed enough to go whole hog, redesigning their entire landscapes. Big wallets can make the change in a single season, planting lots of well-grown trees, especially white oaks. More modest wallets will choose skinnier saplings and plant keystone species by the dozens instead of the hundreds, and still be pleasantly surprised at how quickly the new gardens grow in. The HNP website, <https://www.com/homegrown nationalpark.org> has several before-and-after photos, taken only one or two years apart, showing how quickly nature can be restored, if given a chance.

If you're hesitating because you think native gardens are "messy" and you like a more traditional look, think again. Garden style is based on design, not merely on plant choices, and your ecofriendly space can be anything you want it to be, from the wildest of wild to lord-of-the-manor formality. The effect you're aiming for is achieved with skillful combination of plant shapes, sizes, color, and texture, and natives offer every bit as much variety as the imports.

Trees are starting to leaf out, and the peepers' glorious nightly concerts have begun at Someday Pond. This gardening season, I'll be turning to the HNP website again and again for ideas and guidance, and hoping my upstream neighbors do the same, so the peepers' songs will be heard in every spring to come.