**HOW TO HOST A SUSTAINABLE YARD TOUR**

**By Go Green Wilmette, May, 2023**

Our goal is to help you start sustainable yard tours in your community. We hope that through this event you can raise awareness about the value and importance of sustainable gardening and inspire people in your community to make environmentally responsible choices.

**WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE GARDENING?**

These are gardening practices that are environmentally friendly and do not deplete natural resources. These practices also contribute to a thriving ecosystem and support ecological balance.  Examples of environmentally friendly features and practices include: no use of chemical pesticides or herbicides; use of rain gardens in low areas to soak up standing water; use of native plants; vegetable gardens grown without chemical pesticides or fertilizer; green lawn care, including mulching lawn clippings, aerating lawn, allowing clover to grow and other sustainable practices.

**STEP BY STEP GUIDE**

**1.**      **FORM A COMMITTEE**

First things first, it’s important to form a committee and assign each member with a specific task to complete. You will need 3 - 4 people to organize and set up the tour with more volunteers the day of the event.

**2.**      **SET A DATE AND TIME FOR THE EVENT**

Start by selecting a month and day that works for your group and also for your community. Make sure your dates don’t conflict with other events, such as festivals or graduations. Another very important consideration is the time of the year when the gardens in your area look their best - this is generally late July or early August for native plants.

**3.**      **DETERMINE NUMBER OF YARDS FOR THE TOUR**

We have found that four to six gardens is an ideal number for the tour, but there is no problem with highlighting just one or two really interesting gardens.  It is a good idea to have a variety of gardens on the tour, but at the same time there is no need to offer so many gardens that visitors rush their visits due to too many options. One important consideration when selecting gardens is the proximity of the various gardens on the tour to each other, especially if you are encouraging walking and biking, an important aspect to reduce the carbon footprint of the event and to minimize parking challenges.

**4.**     **FINDING YARDS**

The best place to start finding gardens is through your local garden club or your local environmental club/organization. Another way is to ask your friends and neighbors if they know anyone who has a garden with environmentally-friendly features. You can also ask for recommendations/nominations in your organization’s newsletter or on social media.

 **5.**      **SELECT YARD/GARDEN HOSTS**

Select garden hosts who are knowledgeable, passionate and enthusiastic about sustainable gardening, and are willing to share their gardens with the community. We have found that without exception yard hosts enjoy hosting and are excited to talk about their gardens with the community. We recommend  that you meet with them in advance to get a tour of their yard. This is a great opportunity to see their yard and hear them talk about it. This helps you decide if that particular yard and yard owner are the right fit for your tour. Meeting with them the summer before they host is ideal to see gardens at their best.

**6.**    **FEATURES TO INCLUDE**

Since the goal is to educate people about sustainable gardening practices, looking for yards with environmentally friendly features makes perfect sense. Touring the garden ahead of time helps the organizers identify features they are looking for in the gardens.

Here are some of the features that we believe are important:

1)      Wide selection of native plants

2)      Pollinator and bird friendly habitats

3)      Water wise - rain barrels, swales, etc

4)      No pesticides or herbicide use

5)      Composting methods

6)      Vegetable/edible gardens

7)      Native trees and shrubs

8)    Reduced turf areas, alternatives to conventional grass

**7.**    **YARD DESCRIPTIONS**

Once gardens have been selected, ask the yard hosts to write a description of their gardens. Ask them to highlight some of the important features of the gardens. Give them some idea of length and the features you want them to highlight. Edit the descriptions carefully for accuracy and readability. These descriptions will be shared with the visitors before the tour so people know what to look for when they are visiting various gardens, or to help them select which gardens to visit in case they cannot visit all of them. If your group has a website, you can post the descriptions there for the visitors to see. If you don’t have a website, then share these descriptions through your newsletter. They can also be linked to with a QR code at each home.

**8.**     **TOUR MAP**

Create a map for your garden tour. (Optional)  Promote walking and biking to minimize the carbon footprint of the event and help with parking. ***A special note about yard tours:*** You will want to wait until just before your event to publicize the addresses of the yards on the tour. This is to ensure that people do not visit the yards prematurely and disturb your yard hosts.

**9.**      **PUBLICITY AND GETTING THE WORD OUT**

Getting the word out is essential to the success of your event. Here are some of the ways you would want to publicize the event:

1)      You will need someone to design a poster noting the date, time and description of the tour. It should also point people to a website to find the yard addresses when they are made public

2)      Help with social media: Facebook/Instagram

3)      Reach out to the local newspapers and magazines

4)      Someone that can post on NextDoor

5)      Asking local businesses to publicize by displaying a poster in their store

6)      Someone that can publicize at the local schools

7)   Ask your town’s garden club to publicize the tour.

8)   Ask your local government and park district to publicize the event (see below)

**10.**  **IDENTIFY PARTNERS**

Here are some other groups that you can ask for help getting the word out:

1)     Civic organizations

2)     Schools

3)    Cultural groups

4)  Garden Clubs

**11. SIGNAGE FOR THE YARDS**

Lots of botanical gardens label their plants so that visitors can learn when they visit the gardens. Create signage for garden highlights and for the native plants in the garden. It is a good idea to make a list of native plants for each garden. On the day of the event visitors can learn more by identifying native plants through their labels. It is fun to add interesting facts when making labels for various gardens. Consider using/adding QR codes for this information.

**12. VOLUNTEERS FOR THE EVENT**

We have found that having a volunteer to staff a table at each yard can be helpful both for the yard host and for your organization, in case you would like to engage and inform visitors about other initiatives your group is doing. This is not essential, but it is a good idea at least to ask each host whether she would like to have a volunteer with her during the tour. Get these volunteers lined up a few weeks before the tour.

**13. TWO DAYS BEFORE THE EVENT**

1. Publicize the yard tour addresses and map. By far the easiest way to do this is on a website.
2. Deliver signs to each yard host that they will place in their gardens the day of the tour
3. Ensure volunteers are ready with their assignments
4. Create name tags for yard tour hosts and volunteers
5. Create newsletter sign-up sheets for visitors at all gardens

**14. ON THE DAY OF THE EVENT:**

1)  Drop off tables, name tags, display items, newsletter sign-up sheets

2)  Post yard signs

**15. PHOTOGRAPHER**

One or more designated photographers are important to take pictures of the yards with visitors visiting them. This will be used for post event publicity.

**16.  VIDEOGRAPHER**

Hiring a videographer to make short videos of each garden and then posting them to a (free) YouTube Channel is a great way to increase the impact of the event. It also gives yard hosts a chance to better educate people about things they are passionate about in their yard. We pay $750 for five short videos. Our yard videos have been viewed thousands of times since we started creating them due to Covid restrictions in 2020.

**17. DON’T WORRY TOO MUCH ABOUT THE WEATHER**

In an ideal world we would want the weather to be in the 70s, no rain and no oppressive heat. However, we have found out that our visitors are not discouraged by inclement weather. We always get visitors that are interested in visiting the gardens and bad weather does not hold them back.

**18. REWARDING EXPERIENCE/PRE OR POST PARTY FOR HOSTS**

Organizing a yard tour can be a richly rewarding experience for the organizers, the yard hosts and the visitors. Everyone has fun. Consider hosting a simple gathering shortly before or after the tour for yard hosts as a thank you or so they can meet other hosts and arrange to see each other’s gardens. Also, a gift of Doug Tallamy’s *Nature’s Best Hope*, is a nice idea.

**19. COST/FINANCIAL ISSUES**

The cost of the event is very low, limited to printing of signage, much of which can be used every year. GGW chooses NOT to charge for the tour or use the event as a fundraiser because our goal is to encourage everyone to come, including children, partners and those for whom ticket cost would prevent them from participating.