



Illustration by Nicolás Ortega

TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

## How One Texas Town Is Rethinking the American Lawn

The North Texas suburb of Lewisville is encouraging residents to let their lush, manicured yards grow wild.

By [Will McCarthy](#)     March 14, 2023

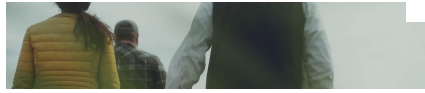
Lewisville, at first glance, is a typical Texas suburb. Wedged in the northwest corner of the Dallas metroplex, the 113,000-person city encompasses a little triangle bordered by a six-lane state toll road and an interstate highway. A small downtown with shops and cafes surrounds the intersection of Church and Mill Streets. There are broad streets, ranch homes, and tidy cul-de-sacs. Until recently, almost every yard in sight was watered and trimmed to maintain a lush appearance. Like so many communities, Lewisville has been an ode to the American lawn: manicured and mowed green grass.

That reputation may be changing soon. In recent months, Lewisville has begun taking steps to transform the city from a sprawling suburb to a wildlife haven. Starting in 2019, city workers began ripping Bermuda grass out of the medians and replacing it with wildflowers. The city's parks department hosts free workshops that help residents transform their lawns into monarch way stations. Last year, voters even approved a change to the city's code that will allow native species to flourish on private lawns. It's all part of a long-term vision to reimagine Lewisville's natural spaces, and potentially the American lawn. A quarter acre at a time.

When **TJ Gilmore**, Lewisville’s mayor, first got into politics in 2011, he noticed that there wasn’t a lot of talk about what Lewisville wanted to be when it grew up. After a period of growth in the nineties, the town had settled into its identity as a staid, first-ring suburb and didn’t seem to be looking ahead. “I ran on the idea that we needed a plan,” Gilmore said.

As part of the process of developing a ten-year vision, Gilmore recognized that Lewisville needed to do more to distinguish itself from other North Texas cities. In 2013, a consulting firm had completed a series of surveys that showed the town’s residents wanted more accessible park spaces and a stronger culture of sustainability and healthy living.

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One of the unique aspects of Lewisville is the amount of open space it manages: more than four thousand acres, most of it made up of a nature preserve that backs up to Lewisville Lake. Until the last decade or so, the open space was used mainly by a small group of hikers and other nature enthusiasts.

During the planning process, Gilmore and city staff began to rethink how they could use that open space and make the city more environmentally friendly. It wasn’t long before the idea of emphasizing native plants took hold. Part of that logic was financial—native plants would save the city money. Plants that are specifically adapted to the local environment root more deeply, require less water, and are better equipped to handle the extreme temperature swings North Texas experiences. Gilmore, who grew up in Arizona, was familiar with the concept of water scarcity.

But as the city partnered with local environmental groups, the initiative snowballed. Soon the city parks department and Friends of LLELA, a local environmental nonprofit, were building demonstration gardens in neighborhood parks, constructing three new environmental education buildings in the nature preserve, and engaging in prairie restoration studies with the University of North Texas. In December, Lewisville adopted new codes that allow residents to plant native prairie grasses in their yard that grow much higher than turf grass. (In some communities, these would be preempted by HOA rules, but most Lewisville residents don’t live in HOA-managed neighborhoods.) The most recent step, which began February 25, is a pilot program that will teach Lewisville homeowners how to transform their yards into certified pollinator and native plant habitats.

Gilmore sees all these changes as an opportunity to position Lewisville as a leader in moving residents away from green monoculture.

“We’re not going to mandate pulling out your lawn and putting in gravel,” Gilmore said. “But if I’m proud of Texas and I want to wear the big belt buckle, you have to be proud of everything. Including the prairie.”

**Manicured green lawns** have a cultural undertow going back to the landed gentry model, when a wealthy, British landlord class lived off rental income. According to a **gardening book from 1837**, “If there are lawns or grass walks, they should be frequently . . . mowed and rolled . . . to give the whole a neat, regular, carpet-like appearance.” This ideal was repackaged as a demonstration of wealth and imported to the United States with little regard for native landscapes, temperatures, or rainfall patterns. Today, we water grass in the desert, an approach that is becoming increasingly expensive and time-consuming as climate change exacerbates drought, heat, and extreme temperature swings.

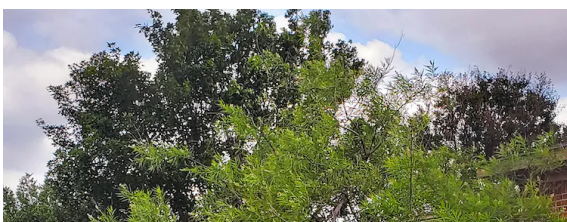
When Cindy Derrick and her husband, Joe, bought their house in Lewisville, they inherited such a lawn. The small property had patchy grass and a few trees planted by developers. For years, Cindy endeavored to improve her yard and plant a garden. When her stepson was severely injured in a car accident, she began working full-time as a caregiver. Periodically, when she could get away for a few minutes, she would step out into the backyard and work on her garden—pulling weeds and watering flowers and veggies. The work centered her.

“When I was able to get out in the yard, that’s when I went to talk to God,” Derrick said. “It helps you through it.”

As time went by, she began tearing up the grass, cutting down nonnative trees, and planting native flowers that provide nectar for pollinators in what she calls the “death strip” between the sidewalk and the road. With help from a gardener friend, Derrick replaced her St. Augustine grass with native plants like milkweed, turk’s cap, bee balm, black-eyed Susan, and desert willow. She planted Mexican mint marigold and watched its blooms predict the first frost every year. Her efforts paid off, as the yard started attracting more wildlife. Earthworms showed up, then birds, lizards, and rabbits. She switched to the front yard. Before long, students from the Catholic school down her street started coming by to look at the flowers.

“I just wanted to create something that looked like it belonged around a farmhouse,” Derrick said. “I like flowers better than I like grass.”

Derrick turned to her lawn as a place of release, not because city codes or pollinator workshops convinced her to do so. But her lawn, all one thousand square feet of it, seems to sit at the center of a statewide zeitgeist in which Texans are realizing, seemingly all at once, that you can bring the beauty of the natural world to your front yard.





**The emotional draw of a green lawn** has endured. Even in Lewisville, some community members complained online about overgrown yards. More than one resident has called them an eyesore, a potential habitat for snakes and other dangerous critters, or criticized the city for inconsistent code enforcement. “Think code compliance would enforce their own rules! I saw a 4ft snake!” Wayne Christian wrote in the Citizens of Lewisville Facebook group in September. “If a homeowner let there [sic] grass get that tall! Wonder what would happen!” Across North Texas, many homeowner associations and town codes still ban grass higher than a few inches, even though native prairie grasses easily grow (and thrive) at seven feet tall.

But in the past decade, Texans’ mindsets seem to be shifting. In 2013, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 198, which prevented HOAs from prohibiting drought-resistant landscaping. Neighborhood garden centers have begun stocking native plants in greater abundance. Native Plant Society of Texas memberships have proliferated throughout the state; the nonprofit now has 3,908 members, up from 1,771 in 2012.

In recent years, the nonprofit’s volunteer-run native plant sales have become immensely popular. “Last spring our Williamson County plant sale sold out of native plants, got more, and then sold out again,” said Meg Inglis, the executive director of the Native Plant Society of Texas.

Inglis attributes some of the increased enthusiasm around native plants to extreme weather events, like 2021’s deep freeze, which many nonnative species didn’t survive. Education has also played a role. Research driven in part by Doug Tallamy, a professor of agriculture and natural resources at the University of Delaware, has helped illustrate the power of native plants in an ecosystem, identifying key trees and plants that host dozens of species, which in turn feed birds and earthworms.

There's also growing recognition that native plants need not always look wild and unruly, nor do they have to be expensive. According to Andrea DeLong-Amaya, the director of horticulture at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, if a homeowner prefers the look of a manicured English garden, they can achieve that. Native plants, too, can be pruned and sheared while still providing myriad ecosystem benefits that a plant from Australia or Hawaii might not. Native plant seeds can even (with permission) be foraged in natural areas and propagated.

"The more native plants you use, the better it's going to be for habitat," DeLong-Amaya said. "More and more, our culture is less connected with the natural world. Plants are the foundation of that."

**In the most eco-utopian** vision of the native plant movement, there's an idea that Texas could be rewilded, quarter acre by quarter acre. Studies have shown that urban areas can be an effective habitat for many species—sometimes more effective than rural, agricultural regions, which may have more open space but are filled with monoculture crops, such as cotton and corn, that host fewer species.

Still, it's unlikely that we are going to restore a pristine native prairie ecosystem. For Texans untrained in horticulture or botany, it may not always even be evident what is supposed to be there and what isn't. Pesticide use, habitat destruction, and climate change will continue to contribute to biodiversity loss. There is no magic bullet.

Gardening is on the rise, however, with 18 million Americans taking up the hobby for the first time in 2020, according to the **National Gardening Survey**. As more gardeners fill yards and apartment complexes with native plants, it's possible cities could begin to create healthier wildlife corridors. Lewisville, one small change at a time, one yard at a time, may be undergoing that transformation. Derrick's yard will be one piece of the puzzle.

Derrick still doesn't know if she and her husband will stay in Lewisville permanently. She recently had hip surgery, and is slowing down a little at age 74. But for now, she'll be out in the garden.

"I'll be out here in my walker," Derrick said. "As long as I'm able, I'll keep going."