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# Texas wildscapes: landscaping for wildlife

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## Abstract

Over 80% of Texas' population resides in urbanized areas. With increased urbanization often comes the urban sprawl that reduces the quantity and quality of wildlife habitat in those areas. Consequently, urbanites generally have fewer opportunities to experience wildlife and wild areas. To address these problems, Texas Parks and Wildlife has developed the Texas Wildscapes Backyard Habitat Certification Program. The goals of the Wildscapes program are to educate the Texas public, particularly urbanites, about the components of wildlife habitat, to foster an appreciation of native plants and the native wildlife that they attract, to recognize the efforts of participants who follow the principals of the program, and to provide an increased quality and quantity of wildlife habitat in urban and suburban areas. The Texas Wildscapes program was initiated in 1994, and the message of wildlife habitat in the city has reached over 7569 participants. Nearly 2000 sites have been certified as official Texas Wildscapes. Other benefits include increased real estate values and increased customer visitation for retail establishments. The final goal, increasing the quantity and quality of wildlife habitat in urban areas, has also been approached and over 134,000 acres have been landscaped according to the Wildscaping principles. The Texas Wildscapes program addresses conservation in urban and suburban environments by educating urbanites about the wild, fostering an appreciation of wildlife and wildlife habitat, recognizing the efforts of Wildscaping participants, and increasing the quantity and quality of wildlife habitat in urbanized areas.

## INTRODUCTION

Over 80% of Texas' population resides in urbanized areas. Urban development often results in urban sprawl that reduces the quantity and quality of wildlife habitat. Consequently, urbanites generally have fewer opportunities to experience the wild. To address these concerns, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has created the Texas Wildscapes Backyard Habitat Program. We have 4 primary goals for the program:

- Education: educate urban- and suburbanites about native Texas wildlife and the components of wildlife habitat
- Appreciation: foster an appreciation of native Texas wildlife and wildlife habitat by urban- and suburbanites.
- Recognition: recognize the efforts of those Texans who are implementing the principals of the Wildscape program (creating wildlife habitat in their own landscaped areas)
- Habitat creation: actually create more viable wildlife habitat in urbanized areas.

## METHODS

To maximize our efforts, we created a plan for defining our intended audience, developing a "Wildscape Kit," and marketing the product. The audience for the program was defined as suburban and urban residents who already had some interest in gardening or landscaping areas, particularly their homes, schools, or business parks. In creating the "identity" for the Kit, we realized that butterflies, songbirds, and hummingbirds are very popular, beautiful, and charismatic. We decided to focus our information on providing habitat for those species. In order to recognize participants and their efforts, we also decided to develop a certification program. Having their site receive the designation "Official Texas Wildscape" would reward participants who effectively applied the Wildscaping principles. In order to market the Wildscape Kit, we decided that Texas Parks and Wildlife Urban Wildlife Biologists would make television and radio appearances, provide press releases to local media, write magazine articles, and make public appearances at garden clubs, nature organization, festivals, and shows. The Wildscape program became one of the tools the

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biologists used to teach the public about native wildlife, native plants, and habitat.

To develop the Wildscapes Kit, staff biologists collected information and created individual booklets on wildlife habitat, gardening for hummingbirds, gardening for butterflies, and a step-by-step guide to designing a wildscape. A plant list specific to the participant's ecological region was also created. The list not only provides basic growth habit, planting information, and bloom times, but also includes ornamental and wildlife values for each species. Brochures on native ornamental trees, Chimney Swifts, monarch butterflies, and birding in Texas were collected in addition to The Backyard Naturalist, a book by Craig Tufts of the National Wildlife Federation. Finally, the application for certification was assembled. All of these materials were placed into a large folder that was then marketed as the "Texas Wildscapes Backyard Habitat Information and Certification Kit," or simply "The Wildscapes Kit."

## RESULTS

To determine whether the Texas Wildscapes program has been successful, I examined how the program has addressed the goals of education, fostered appreciation for the wild, recognized participants' efforts, and habitat creation.

For the purposes of this paper, education is defined as simply giving the message of the Wildscapes program (providing habitat elements of food, water, shelter, space, and at least 50% native Texas plants) to a participant. A participant is defined as a person, family, or affiliated group of people that purchase the Wildscapes Kit. Assuming people use products they buy, the purchase of the Wildscapes Kit indicates that a person has received the message of wildlife and habitat. Using this definition, over 7569 participants have been educated about Texas Wildscapes. Countless others have received some education through printed media, television and radio interviews, and personal presentations. Wildscape participants are located in nearly every county of the state, but are concentrated in the urbanized areas of Houston, San Antonio, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Austin. Inspired by the message of Wildscaping, participants have requested more in-depth and hands-on information. The Urban Wildlife Biologists have responded by providing one- and two-day Wildscaping Workshops as well as full-semester adult education Wildscape classes. In the classroom, elementary and middle school teachers have not only created outdoor classrooms with the Wildscape information, but have also

included the information about native wildlife and habitat into their curricula. Finally, participants have become more aware of outdated municipal ordinances and deed restrictions that allow the degradation of habitat in their cities and neighborhoods.

The response to our second goal, fostering an appreciation for native wildlife and wild habitat, has been truly amazing. One part of the application for certification process involves taking an inventory of the property a participant is certifying. The inventory is to include native and exotic plant species, wildlife structures, and wildlife observations. Through this inventory, the participant learns to see the property "with new eyes," observing wildlife they never knew could exist in an urban setting. People have reported observing hummingbird nests, red foxes, caterpillars, hawks, and a variety of assorted butterflies and songbirds. This process of learning about, observing, and long-term monitoring is one of the best ways to "fall in love" with the wild.

Our third goal of recognizing the efforts of participants can be quantified as the number of Official Texas Wildscapes certifications issued. Since the program's initiation, 1,196 sites have been certified. However, there are other ways to recognize benefits from Wildscaping. Real estate developers, such as Meridian Homes of San Antonio, have discovered that lots that are Wildscaped are worth more to some people than traditionally landscaped areas. Retail establishments such as hotels, restaurants, bed and breakfasts, and plant nurseries are discovering that many people would rather visit living ecosystems than sterile, over-watered lawns. Finally, students are discovering that by providing wildlife habitat they are rewarded by an influx of wildlife. They are thrilled with the discoveries of birds, butterflies, salamanders, and toads that "reward" a successful Wildscape with their presence.

Our final goal for the Texas Wildscapes program is to facilitate the creation of more quality wildlife habitat in urbanized areas. Because this application was directed toward a potentially non-technical audience, all units were requested in English units (acres or square feet). Of over 7,500 participants, 3,691 responded to the question asking how many acres would be landscaped with the Wildscaping principles. Those respondents indicated that a total of 134,799 acres would be affected. Excluding the 2 largest sites, the average plot size is 16 acres, while the median site size is 0.75 acres. This amount of enhanced, preserved, conserved, or created habitat certainly indicates an increase in the quality (Wildscape habitat) and quantity (134,799 acres) of wildlife habitat in urban areas.

## DISCUSSION

The Wildscape program was designed to address major issues in urban and suburban development. Over 80% of Texans live in areas where they have fewer and fewer opportunities to experience nature. Additionally, the quantity and quality of the wildlife habitat in urbanized areas is being reduced by rapid development. Texas Wildscapes can be part of the solution to these problems. The program educates Texas about wildlife and wild habitat, fosters an increase in appreciation of the wild, recognizes participants' efforts to conserve, preserve, and enhance the wild, and creates more viable wildlife habitat in urban and suburban areas. Perhaps the most important contribution of the Wildscapes program is the growth of acceptance of wildlife and wildlife habitat as worthy of establishment and preservation. As our natural areas become increasingly urbanized, it will be essential to bring the public back into nature. The Texas Wildscapes program does that not only by bringing participants closer to nature, but also by bringing nature back into the city.