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Good to grow: Illinois passes Native Homeowner's Landscaping Act

[Cameron Raab](#) [August 6, 2024 - 7:00am](#)



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In a huge win for the environment, native pollinators, and gardeners across the state, Illinois recently passed [HB5296](#), also known as the Native Homeowner's Landscaping Act. In summary, this bill:

Provides that an association shall not prohibit any resident or owner from planting or growing Illinois native species on the resident's or owner's lawn, with certain requirements. Provides for an Association to be able to adopt reasonable rules and regulations governing native landscapes, with certain requirements.

This is an exciting change, and comes as a result of broader cultural shifts in how we think about our lawns as well as a better understanding of the financial, environmental, and social costs of maintaining them.

As it stands, lawns comprise more than [40 million acres](#) of land in the US, and we spend roughly [four billion collective hours per year](#) taking care of them. To keep them short and tidy we burn through [800 million gallons of gas per year](#) powering lawnmowers, leaf blowers, and string-trimmers. To keep them green we saturate them with [eight billion gallons of water per day](#). That water runs off and finds its way into our rivers and streams, carrying with it the [90 million pounds of fertilizer and 78 million pounds of pesticides we spray or spread](#) on our lawns to keep them weed-free and well-fed throughout the year.

Part of the reason maintaining a turf grass lawn is so resource-intensive is because we are fighting a losing battle against evolution. By and large, the grass growing on our lawns [doesn't want to grow](#) there. The most common varieties grown on American lawns today evolved to grow in different climates, and often on different continents entirely ([Kentucky Bluegrass is native to Europe](#), for example) so all the watering, fertilizing, and pesticide use is necessary just to keep them alive.



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In direct contrast to non-native turf grass lawns, [native plants](#) evolved to live here without human intervention, so they consume far fewer resources. They didn't evolve to be regularly mowed, so they require substantially [less maintenance](#). Their roots go far deeper than non-native turf grass, resulting in much better erosion control and less toxic runoff into local rivers and streams. Their benefit to wildlife is even more substantial, and nowhere is the difference between native plantings and turf grass lawns more pronounced.

Compared to native plants, our lawns provide almost [no benefit whatsoever to life](#) (humans included) and create [ecological dead zones](#) around our homes. Despite all the time and effort we put into them, we get very little in return beyond the subjective aesthetic value some believe they provide. The silence and sterility of a perfectly manicured turf grass lawn at night is unsettling. Where you should be hearing crickets and cicadas, you hear air conditioners and little else. Where you should be seeing fireflies and moths, you see...nothing. Something is missing, and it's all the sights and sounds you'd normally find in a functioning ecosystem. Because more and more of our land is dedicated to non-native monocultures, we are losing pollinators at an [alarming rate](#). This is having [catastrophic impacts](#) on our ability to feed ourselves. The loss of native plant species is also [wreaking havoc](#) on our lakes and rivers, which rely on

them to filter the water before it gets there. Turf grass also stores far less carbon than [native plants](#), further exacerbating climate change. We're maintaining our lawns at the cost of our own well-being, and it is objectively unsustainable.

Unfortunately, many who have attempted to replace their lawns have come into conflict with one of the most notorious enforcers of the stereotypical lawn aesthetic, their neighborhood Homeowners Association. While many cities still have restrictive codes on the books, it's HOAs that regularly prove themselves to be the most significant (and frustrating) barrier to replacing lawns with native plantings. In Illinois, roughly [1.5 million homes belong to an HOA](#). That's 30% of all homes in the state. At an average lawn size of .3 acres, that's a combined 450,000 acres of land that homeowners are by and large forced to dedicate to non-native turf grasses.

Luckily, the Native Homeowners Landscaping Act explicitly restricts the ability of HOA's to interfere in the process of converting your lawn to native plantings. Millions of homeowners locally and across the state now have a chance to undo generations of environmental and ecological damage by replacing their lawns with native plantings that free them from the burdens and costs of lawn care while simultaneously supporting and re-invigorating their local ecosystem. That's millions of homes and hundreds of thousands of acres of land that can now contribute to and enrich the broader ecological web we all rely on instead of being forced to further degrade it by maintaining a non-native turf grass lawn.

For more information on how to make the switch yourself, the [University of Illinois Extension](#) office is a treasure trove of resources that can help you choose what to plant, when to plant it, and how best to do so. The [Champaign County Master Gardeners](#) (also through the U of I Extension) are another great place to get information on the ins and outs of incorporating more native plants into your life. The [Idea Garden](#) on campus (maintained by the Master Gardeners) even has a native planting section where you can go for inspiration and guidance on what grows best in our area.

"A place becomes a home when it sustains you, when it feeds you in body as well as spirit. To recreate a home, the plants must also return." — Robin Wall Kimmerer