

Tennessee Smart Yard Program to Protect Our Water Quality By Joy Stewart, Master Gardener

Did you know there is a direct connection between your yard and our state's water quality? Or perhaps you simply want to change the landscaping in your yard and the issue of water quality hasn't even crossed your mind? Either way there is a great program run by the University of Tennessee Extension called Tennessee Smart Yards. It is designed to help you create a beautifully landscaped yard and at the same time conserve and protect our state's water.

The single greatest risk to our water supply is called "nonpoint pollution." It doesn't come from a single location; it comes from everywhere when rainwater falls to the ground and turns into runoff. In the process, water run-off picks up all the by-products of our lifestyle – automotive products such as gasoline and oil spills, car exhaust, brake dust, and tire particles plus many other products such as pet waste, soil particles, fertilizer, and pesticides. That waste is carried into our lakes and streams. According to our state's clean water assessment, 49% of our streams and rivers are moderately to highly impaired by pollution and cannot support healthy fish and aquatic life.

Our streams and rivers begin anywhere rainwater lands and that especially includes our lawns. Tennessee Smart Yards' motto is "keeping Tennessee's land and water healthy, one yard at a time." A Smart Yard is one that is in harmony with the environment, keeping rainwater on site and preventing it from turning into runoff, while also providing a beautiful yard for the homeowner. But you don't have to be an expert gardener or landscaper to create a Tennessee Smart Yard.

The program offers a list of nine principles or simple actions that you can adopt in your home landscape to benefit both you and the environment. You can use this checklist to help you create a Tennessee Smart Yard. These principles include actions such as finding the right plant for the right place, how to manage your soil and mulch, how to water efficiently, how to use fertilizer appropriately, how to reduce run-off, and how to provide for wildlife.

The program offers a detailed four-step implementation plan that lets you personalize your plan to those actions that make sense to you and your yard. These steps include a workbook and a yardstick to measure your progress, video lessons on each of the nine principles so you can learn from experts, and how to get your yard certified as an official Tennessee Smart Yard. If you are interested in protecting our streams and rivers even if not wanting certification, click on the "Path to Certification" to learn how to get started.

Since many native plants, from wildflowers to trees, are known for their ability to help rainwater be absorbed into the soil, the Tennessee Smart Yards website also includes a native plant database. It includes fact sheets and photos for approximately 800 Tennessee native plant species. These are easy-to-read, non-technical summaries that help you select plants adapted to your yard. The database is proving to be very popular, with 86,000 views and 41,400 visitors in 2023. So be sure to check out the Smart Yards website at <https://tnyards.utk.edu/>

NEW CLASS: The next University of Tennessee Master Gardener class at the Sullivan County Extension Office located at 140 Spurgeon Ln, Blountville, TN. **starts on January 30, 2024**, and continues every Tuesday for 14 weeks from 10AM – 12noon.

**Call the Extension Office for information and application form.
423-574-1919**

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.