

The Nature Center at Steele Creek Park - Native Plants Garden

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The Native Plants Garden at The Nature Center at Steele Creek Park, in Bristol Tennessee, was begun in 2019 to accompany a native plants exhibit contained within the Nature Center itself. While there are several garden projects around The Nature Center that require significant volunteer work, our current primary effort is development and maintenance of the educational Native Plants Garden. Both the indoor exhibit and the garden itself are focused exclusively on the native plants of our region. A key feature of the indoor exhibit is that it incorporates three windows overlooking the garden area, thus tying the two exhibits together.

The roughly 6,500 square foot garden area next to The Nature Center was established more than a decade ago as a woodland wildflower garden. Over the years, due primarily to a lack of able volunteers, it had become greatly overgrown with invasive non-natives, and aggressive native plants.

Beginning in 2019 we cleared as many of the undesirable plants as possible and documented over forty native plant species already existing in the garden area. Since then, we have added many new species, created paths through the garden area, and begun adding plant labels identifying representative specimens of most of the native species. We now have approximately 90 species in the garden, with the goal of eventually having at least 100 species represented. We work closely with the Nature Center naturalists to identify and prioritize the species to be added. In addition to further developing the existing woodland area, we have added two new sections for meadow wildflowers and other plants favoring a sunnier environment.

Representative plants are labelled with attractive signs containing their common and scientific names, and printed trifold guides for garden visitors are being developed. Our plan is to have brochures for all seasons of the year, as well as ones covering special topics such as traditional uses of native plants. Eventually, we will have an educational kiosk located outdoors next to The Nature Center, at the entrance to the garden.

This ongoing project provides volunteers the opportunity to help with further planning, development, and maintenance of the garden in the coming years. Volunteers are needed to help acquire and plant new specimens, as well as to maintain control of the inevitable re-emergence of undesired plants. We also need help with maintaining the paths and performing other tasks. In the next year or so we anticipate the addition of a native fern garden on the other side of The Nature Center. This will require considerable volunteer support as we prepare the area, acquire and plant new specimens and, ultimately, maintain this additional educational area.

Other important roles for volunteers are to maintain our plant database, to compile educational information for all the species exhibited, and to assist in the development of the printed plant guides. Once installed, information in the educational kiosk will be maintained and updated by volunteers.

The Nature Center at Steele Creek Park has numerous, wonderful new exhibits, all focused on the flora and fauna of the region, as well as an extensive herbarium collection started several

years ago by several Friends of Steele Creek Nature Center volunteers. The newly opened Explorers' Library contains one of the largest collections of regional natural history books and journals within a 100-mile radius. Steele Creek Park also hosts a certified Native Trees Arboretum and certified Monarch Watch Waystation garden.

The staff does extensive programming, both on-site as well as outreach, especially in the area schools. Jeremy Stout, the full-time Nature Center Naturalist (and City of Bristol Tennessee arborist) has done presentations on Native Plants in the Landscape for Northeast Tennessee Master Gardener classes.

For more information about The Nature Center and Steele Creek Park visit the Friends of Steele Creek Nature Center and Park website: www.friendsofstelecreek.org or on Facebook [@FriendsOfSteeleCreekPark](https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfSteeleCreekPark). If you think you'd like to become a gardens volunteer, contact Project Leader Robin Feierabend at mail@friendsofstelecreek.org or (423) 764-3336.

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.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.