



Caring for Our Piece of the Earth

**How to organize
and participate**

Janet Allen

Introduction: How to organize and participate

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Caring for Our Piece of the Earth

How to organize and participate

*As gardeners and stewards of our land, we
have never been so empowered — and the
ecological stakes have never been so high.*

*~ Douglas Tallamy,
Bringing Nature Home*



About the course

Many of us strive to live in a sustainable manner in many areas of our lives: minimizing our home's energy use, choosing transportation wisely, supporting our local economy and local farmers, avoiding food waste, and so on.

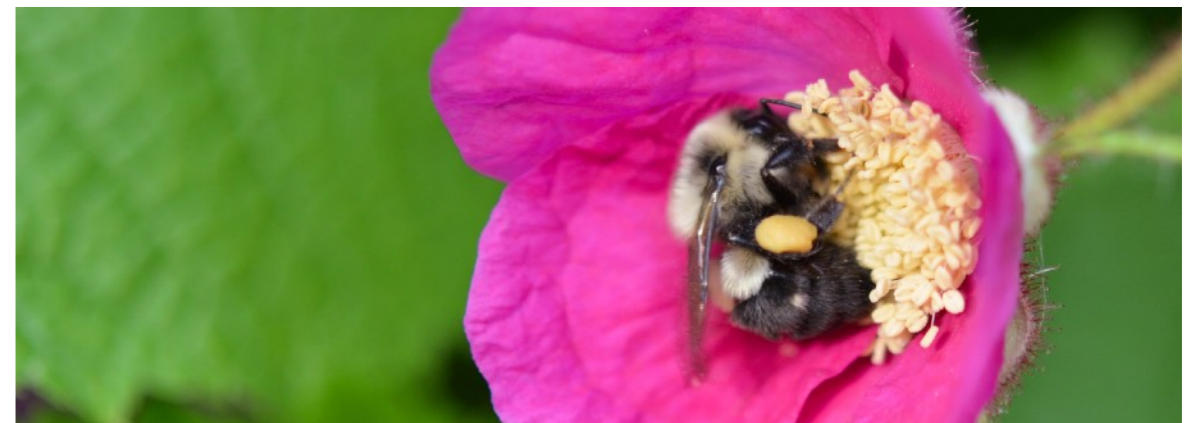
But there's one area we often overlook: care of our yards. Of course, we may have already reduced or eliminated pesticides. We may even have replaced some of our lawn with a vegetable garden. But have we thought deeply about the implications of all our landscaping choices and practices?

Our yards may seem insignificant compared to other lifestyle choices, but during this course you'll discover that stewardship of our yards – the only piece of the earth we control and manage – may affect life on earth for good or ill at least as much as any other choices we make.

And one of the most profound effects may be on ourselves. "Bringing nature home" means we don't have to travel to "visit" nature. A bit of nature is right there, easy to experience just by looking out the window or walking out the door into our yard.

Reconnecting with nature – and learning how nature really works – may be the most fundamental action we can take both for ourselves and for the future of the planet. This connection can influence all other choices we make.

This course aims to increase our awareness of how we can become better stewards of our own piece of the earth. It also aims to reconnect us with the natural world and foster our enjoyment of the earth and its creatures.



Enjoy a yard buzzing with life!

Inspiration to change

How can we inspire people to make the changes needed so we can leave our descendants a living planet? How can we provide the information they need to do so?

Learning from the many excellent books and articles on various aspects of sustainability is useful, but often we can understand ideas much better when we talk about them with fellow community members. And by sharing insights and enthusiasm, we're more likely to move from having good intentions to taking action.

With some slight variations, this course is modeled on and inspired by the discussion courses pioneered by EcoChallenge (formerly known as the Northwest Earth Institute). Its many excellent discussion courses on various aspects of sustainability are available on its website at <https://ecochallenge.org>.

Regional differences

Most of the photos in this course are taken in the Northeast as are many of the examples. But the content and principles discussed are applicable to most regions of the country.

Where possible, resources (such as the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center) are provided that address all parts of the country.

The course sessions

Session 1: The American Landscape

To know how to be good stewards of our land, we first need to understand how most people are currently generally managing their home landscapes.

In this session we explore the impact of the conventional American landscape on biodiversity and ecosystems.

We consider the role of lawns in American culture and their environmental costs such as impacts of pesticides and fertilizers, water use, and pollution.

We also consider how humans have “taken it all,” leaving little land for wildlife – and how homeowners can make a difference.

Session 2: The Webs of Life

We discuss the role of plants and animals in the food web. We also consider the impacts on the food web of replacing native plants with non-native plants.

Next, we learn about the soil food web that supports plants.

Finally, we learn some ways we can care for these food webs in our yards to support healthy ecosystems in our own landscapes and in the world beyond.

Session 3: Creating an Earth-friendly Yard

We consider how we might change cultural norms about lawns and how we can solve the problems created by the conventional American landscape.

We introduce the idea of thinking of the landscape as being composed of layers rather than as just a collection of plants.

We learn the basic habitat elements wildlife need: food, water, cover, and a place to raise young.

We consider aesthetics, and how our ideas about what is beautiful might evolve.

Finally, we explore how management of our landscape can help protect climate.

Session 4: The Birds, the Bees, and Other Creatures

We learn first about some general habitat features that can benefit many kinds of creatures and make your landscape especially enjoyable for people, too.

Then we learn more specific ways you can consider the needs of particular kinds of creatures: birds, pollinators, insects, butterflies, frogs and toads, and mammals.

We also learn about conservation measures we can take to make our habitats and the world beyond safer for these creatures.

Session 5: Our Landscapes, Our Selves, and the World Beyond

We explore how we can transform our thinking to better appreciate landscapes that sustain life.

We also examine the relationship between our yards and our connection with nature.

We learn how and why to participate in citizen science projects.

Finally, we explore how to extend the stewardship of our own yards to our communities and to the world beyond.

Session 6: Celebration

In this final session, we celebrate our new understandings of the importance of home landscapes by gathering together to participate in a special event chosen by the group.



(Most) baby birds require lots of caterpillars or other insects.

Roles and guidelines

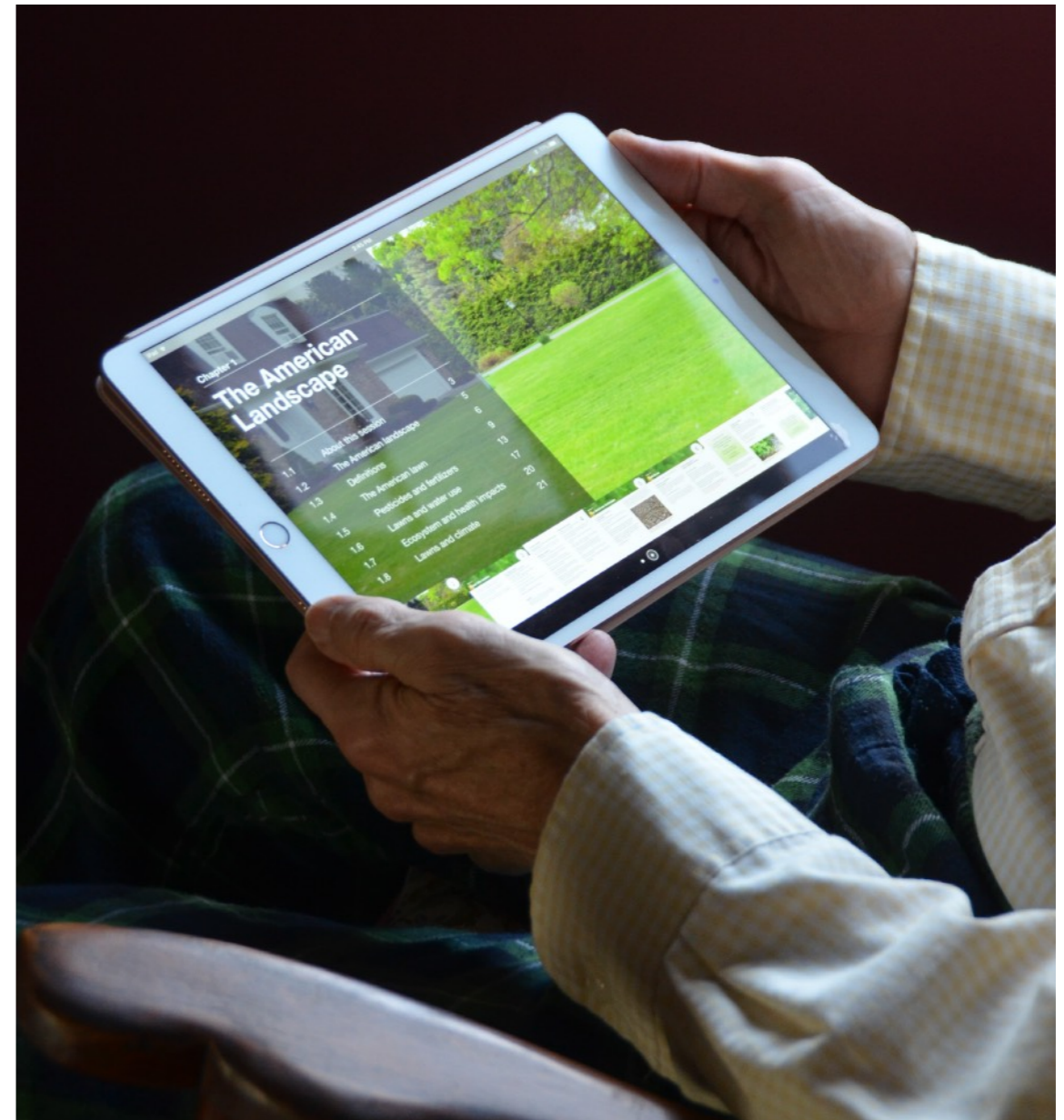
No expert or teacher needed!

You don't have to wait for an "expert" to offer this course since it's a participant-led not an instructor-led course. The materials themselves are the "teacher," and fellow participants enliven the materials in the discussions.

Roles

Volunteers assume various roles during the course, and except for the Course Coordinator, the roles rotate each week.

- A **Course Coordinator** coordinates the course and keeps it running smoothly.
- The **Facilitator** facilitates an individual session, keeping it moving and making sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute.
- If the group chooses, an **Opener** starts each session and the **Notetaker** records commitments to action.
- And, of course, everyone is a **Course Participant!**



No need to print out the materials unless you want to. Just bring your tablet or phone to the discussion if you want to refer to the material.

For the Course Participant

Unexpected circumstances arise for all of us, but as a participant in the course, you can make the course more valuable for yourself and for fellow course participants by making an effort to:

- Attend every meeting and arrive on time.
- Prepare for the upcoming session by reading the materials ahead of time. (Guidelines for selecting materials follow.)
- Participate in the special project experiences.
- Respect other participants' opinions and experiences.
- Volunteer to take one of the session roles during the course.

In addition to some articles incorporated in the course materials, this course uses the wealth of excellent materials available online, both text and video.

If you don't have access to the internet, please arrange to read these articles and view the videos at a friend's house or at a public library. Your Course Coordinator or a librarian can help you

NOTE: A few links to online resources are to New York Times articles. These are accessible to non-subscribers, but there is a limit of ten articles a month. Some of these are optional articles, so you may not reach this limit, but your group may want to share accessing and printing out these articles.

Materials for the following week's discussion

The PDF files are available at <https://www.hgcny.org/course> in two versions on this website:

- a PDF file: for example, "Session1.pdf"
- a PDF file with lower-resolution photos: for example, "Session1 lo-res.pdf" (The only advantage of this version is that it's a smaller file, BUT the photos aren't as sharp.)

These PDF files can be viewed as regular PDFs or in iBooks.

These can be viewed on a smart phone, iPad, or computer with the Kindle app or other readers. It's not necessary to print the materials unless you're more comfortable with that.

Most people in past groups have brought their tablets or smartphones to the discussion, and maybe printouts of just a few of their favorite articles.

Pressed for time?

Yes, there are a lot of materials provided in the course, **but you don't have to read them all!**

Please read at least the most fundamental materials before the gathering. You'll enjoy the discussion more and will be able to offer your thoughts about the ideas. You may not have time each week to read all the materials provided, so they are tagged to indicate their importance to the following week's discussion.

There are THREE categories:

Here's some guidance for choosing selections to read or view.




Materials marked with a “leaf” icon are **fundamental**:

Please read or view materials marked with this “leaf” since they convey concepts important for the week's discussion.

Section 3

Definitions

Let's clarify some terms that will occur throughout the course.

 **What is an ecosystem?**
by Doug Tallamy

“An ecosystem is the combination of an interacting community of living organisms and their physical environment, functioning as an ecological unit in a given place. The operative word in this definition is ‘interacting’.”

~ THE LIVING LANDSCAPE, PP. 106

An example of a “fundamental” article, with a “leaf” icon

Materials titled in bold:

Helpful materials you're encouraged to read or view if you have time and interest.

Contributing to environmental problems
by F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, and Gordon Geballe

“In our efforts to make it greener, to make it all grass, to keep it closely mowed, and to make it a constant companion of suburban development, we are unnecessarily contributing to some of the most severe environmental problems facing the world today.”

~ REDESIGNING THE AMERICAN LAWN, PP. 88-89

An example of a “basic” article, titled in black bold type

Materials titled in grey:

Optional materials provided so participants can customize the course to meet their own needs and interests. The titles of these materials are labeled, for example, as “To learn more” or simply as “OPTIONAL.”

What is biodiversity?

~ The American Museum of Natural History

This article offers a definition of biodiversity that includes humans and human cultural diversity as part of biodiversity.

OPTIONAL:

An example of an “optional” article, titled in grey, bold type

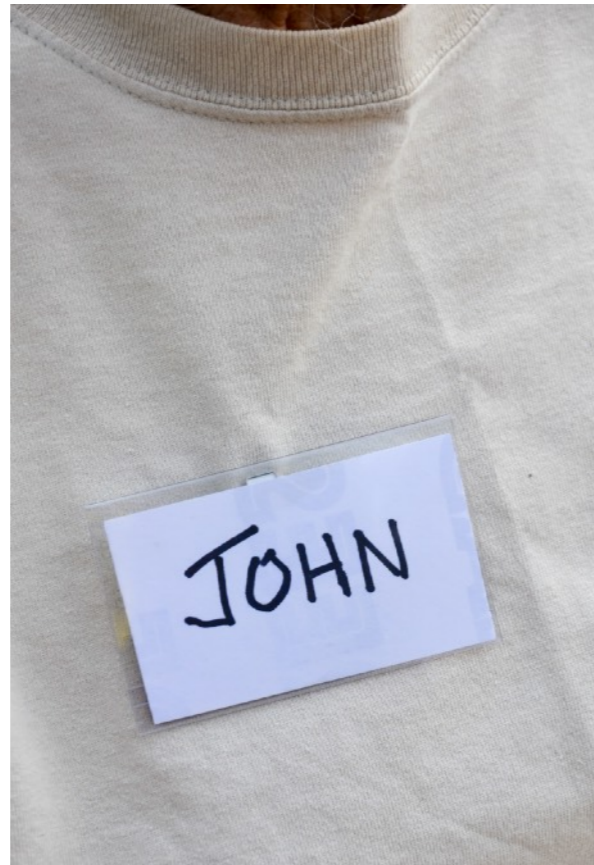
For the Course Coordinator

The Course Coordinator is the only role one person assumes throughout the course. Your role is to get the course off the ground, then provide assistance during the course as needed.

NOTE: The Course Coordinator does NOT have to be an expert or even the most knowledgeable person about the topic!

Your role is to:

- Choose a time that would work best for your group. Daytimes, evenings, weekends? Meet every week, every other week, or (recommended) two three-week sessions with a week off in between? Consider holidays and other events (e.g. Super Bowl) when choosing dates. A 1-1/2 hour session works well.
- Find a convenient location to hold the course. This could be in a home, at a library, or at some other public place.



Reusable name tags will last the whole course

- Initiate the course by publicizing it and taking course registrations. **IMPORTANT:** Make sure participants know they should read Session 1 materials **BEFORE** the first meeting.
- Assist participants who may need some technical help. This course requires only minimal technology and computer skills, but since this is inherently an internet-based course, make sure each participant is able to access the materials. The public library often can assist, or a participant with the technology and skills could work with a participant without these resources.
- Maintain the sign-up schedule of jobs for each session.
- Be the go-to person to keep the course running smoothly, such as notifying the group of weather cancellations, for example. Be sure you have people's phone numbers for last minute changes.
- Send email reminders (a sample email follows) to the group a day or two before each session and remind the facilitator, opener, and notetaker of their roles. Also remind participants of any special "homework" projects.
- Please provide name tags for participants.

Below is a sample group email reminder you can use.

It's a good idea to put participants' names in a BCC (blind carbon copy) field unless you have permission to display the email addresses of the participants.

Folks,

Just a reminder that our Caring for Our Piece of the Earth discussion group will be meeting (DATE) at (TIME) at (LOCATION).

We'll be discussing the readings in Session [#], available for downloading at <https://www.hgcny.org/course/>. As you're reading, please note one or two ideas from the readings you find most interesting or that most resonate with you.

[IF SESSION 1] We'll also share our "Experience Nature in Your Yard" experience described in Session 1.

[IF SESSION 2] We'll also share our "A Walk Through Your Neighborhood" experience described in Session 2.

[IF SESSION 5] We'll also share our "Experience Nature in Your Yard 2.0" experience described in Session 5.

For this session, [NAME] is our Opener, [NAME] is our Facilitator, and [NAME] is our Notetaker.

Tips on getting a group together

Who might be interested? It's often easiest to draw from an established group, but you can publicize it to the public, too. Consider your neighborhood, garden clubs, other environmental groups such as Audubon or Sierra Club chapters, or any community groups at all.

Perhaps a local library would co-sponsor a group and publicize it in their newsletters and with on-site posters. Contact local garden centers that sell native plants or wildlife-focused stores such as Wild Birds Unlimited.

Think creatively about who might be interested. The course is relevant for anyone — whether they're gardeners or not — who maintains their own or some other piece of land.

Don't forget to mention that participating in this group is an excellent way to get to know other people and to have thoughtful conversations about something that matters — an opportunity all too often missing in modern life. They may even make some new friends!

Two publicity posters are available on the course webpage at: <https://www.hgcny.org/course/>.

Either or both can be used to publicize your discussion session.

A sample assignment sheet follows.

CARING FOR OUR PIECE OF THE EARTH

A SIX-SESSION DISCUSSION COURSE

PURPOSE

- To learn how to be a good steward of your own piece of the earth.
- To learn how to provide habitat for wildlife and create a healthy yard for people, too.
- To extend these understandings to the world beyond.

HOW IT WORKS:

This is a **FREE** course organized by a course facilitator.

The course materials are provided as PDF files or as iBooks. Go to www.hgcny.org/course/ to download the FREE materials.

TO PARTICIPATE:

CONTACT: _____
 at _____
 DATES: _____
 TIME: _____
 PLACE: _____

SESSION THEMES:

- The American Landscape:** This session explores the impact of the conventional American landscape on biodiversity and ecosystems. We consider the role of lawns and their environmental costs.
- The Webs of Life:** This session has two parts. The first is about the role of plants and animals in the food web and the impact on the food web of replacing native plants with non-natives. The second part discusses the importance of the hidden soil food web and how to care for it.
- Creating an Earth-friendly Yard:** This session considers how we might change cultural norms about lawns and how we can solve the problems created by the conventional American landscape. This session introduces the concept of layers in the landscape rather than thinking only of individual plants. We consider the concept of habitat for both wildlife and people.
- Birds, Bees, and Other Creatures:** This session describes in more detail specific habitat features that will benefit particular kinds of creatures such as bird, pollinators, butterflies and moths, other insects, amphibians, and mammals. It also describes conservation practices.
- Our Landscapes, Ourselves, and the World Beyond:** This session examines the relationship between our yards and our connection with nature, including the benefits of nature for people. We explore how we can take what we've learned to practice stewardship of landscapes into our community and beyond.
- Celebration:** In this session we celebrate what we've learned by participating in a special event. Groups may choose to share a meal, visit a local natural area or habitat garden, view a documentary, such as *Hometown Habitat*, or visit each other's yards to show what they've done so far or to get advice.

CARING FOR OUR PIECE OF THE EARTH

Session Themes:
 Introduction to the Course
 Session 1: The American Landscape
 Session 2: The Webs of Life
 Session 3: Creating an Earth-friendly Yard
 Session 4: Birds, Bees, and Other Creatures
 Session 5: Our Landscapes, Ourselves, and the World Beyond
 Session 6: Celebration!

To participate or to learn more:

CONTACT: _____ at _____

DATES: _____

TIME: _____

PLACE: _____

Visit www.hgcny.org/course/ to download the free course materials.

Poster describing the course

A second version of a poster to use alone or in combination with the first poster

Course Schedule

Course Coordinator: _____

Coordinator contact information: _____

Meeting location: _____

Date	Facilitator	Opener	Notetaker
Session 1: The American Landscape	_____	_____	_____
Session 2: Webs of Life	_____	_____	_____
Session 3: Creating an Earth-friendly Yard	_____	_____	_____
Session 4: The Birds, the Bees, and Other Creatures	_____	_____	_____
Session 5: Our Landscape, Our Selves, and the World Beyond	_____	_____	_____
Session 6: Celebration	_____	_____	_____

PDF files for each session

Depending on your computer and internet, these may take a while to download, but they only need to be downloaded once.

- [Introduction: How the course works](#) (1 MB)
- [Session 1: The American Landscape](#) (12 MB)
- [Session 2: The Webs of Life](#) (17 MB)
- [Session 3: Creating an Earth-friendly Yard](#) (14 MB)
- [Session 4: Birds, Bees, and Other Creatures](#) (29 MB)
- [Session 5: Our Landscapes, Ourselves, and the World Beyond](#) (13 MB)
- [Session 6: Celebration](#) (3 MB)

Smaller PDF files:

Same content, but lower quality images; faster downloads.

- [Introduction: How the course works](#) (1 MB)
- [Session 1: The American Landscape](#) (3 MB)
- [Session 2: The Webs of Life](#) (4 MB)
- [Session 3: Creating an Earth-friendly Yard](#) (3 MB)
- [Session 4: Birds, Bees, and Other Creatures](#) (7 MB)
- [Session 5: Our Landscapes, Ourselves, and the World Beyond](#) (3 MB)
- [Session 6: Celebration](#) (1 MB)

Download these PDF files from
www.hgcny.org/course/

Showing results for "caring for our piece of the earth"

Books

The materials are also available at the iBooks

For the Session Facilitator

As the Session Facilitator, your role is to stimulate and moderate the discussion. You do NOT need to be an expert or the most knowledgeable person about the topic.

Your role is to:

- Begin and end on time.
- Start with the Opening (if your group chose to have this role). Then ask the Circle Question, which gives everyone an opportunity to speak from the start and helps them feel comfortable participating in the rest of the discussion. Give each person a chance to answer the question briefly *without interruption or comment from other participants*.
- Ask some or all of the questions. The first question is important: it asks people to share one or two ideas from the readings that most resonated with them.
- Keep the discussion focused on the session's topic. A delicate balance is best — don't force the group into a narrow discussion of the questions, but don't allow the discussion to drift too far.
- Make sure your group has time to talk about their commitments to action at the end each gathering.

- Manage the group process, using these guidelines:
 - A primary goal is for everyone to participate and to learn from themselves and each other. Draw out quiet participants by creating an opportunity for each person to contribute. Don't let one or two people dominate the discussion. Thank them for their opinions and then ask another person to share.
 - Be an active listener. You need to hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Model this for others.

The focus should be on personal reactions to the readings — on personal values, feelings, and experiences. *It's NOT a test* of how well participants read or understood the readings.

The course is not for judging others' responses. *Consensus is NOT a goal*.

Putting It Into Practice section of the discussion:

The facilitator should ensure that the action item discussion:

- allows each person's action item to be discussed for 1-2 minutes;
- remains non-judgmental and non-prescriptive;
- focuses on encouraging fellow group members in their commitments and actions.

For the Session Opener (Optional role)

The group may choose to have an Opener, rotating among volunteers in the group.

The Session Opener brings a **SHORT** opening, *not more than two or three minutes*. It should be something meaningful about your relationship to the natural world.

Some examples of openers are: a short personal story, a natural object or photograph that has special meaning for you, a poem, or similar things. Have fun and be creative!

The purpose of the opening is twofold.

- First, it provides a transition for the group from their other activities of the day into the group discussion.
- Second, since the opening is personal, it allows the group to get better acquainted with you. This aspect of the course can be very rewarding for you and for your fellow participants.

For the Notetaker (Optional role)

The group may choose to have a Notetaker, rotating among volunteers in the group.

In the Putting It Into Practice section at the end of each session, each participant can commit to one action item they will complete before the next meeting. They will share their action with the group, and the Notetaker records each person's commitment.

Each week the notetaker role will rotate. During the portion of discussion focused on action items, the Notetaker from the previous meeting will read aloud each person's action item, and group members will have the opportunity to share their successes and struggles in implementing their actions.

The new Notetaker for the upcoming session will then record each person's commitment for the next meeting.

Permissions

Throughout the course

Tallamy, Doug - Excerpts from *Bringing Nature Home* and from *The Living Landscape*. Used with permission of Douglas Tallamy.

Stein, Sara – Excerpts and graphics from *Noah’s Garden* and from *Planting Noah’s Garden*. Used with permission by Dr. Lincoln Stein, Literary Executor of Sara Stein.

Bormann, F. Herbert, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe - Excerpts and graphics from *Redesigning the American Lawn*. Used with permission of Dr. Gordon T. Geballe.

Session One

Know Your Roots graphic. Used with permission from Mid-America Regional Council at marc.org.

<http://www.cleanwaterkcmetro.org/know-your-roots/>

Session Three

Tallamy, Doug. “*Deceptive Beauty*.”
Used with permission of Doug Tallamy.

About the author



Janet Allen

Janet Allen is the co-founder and president of the *Habitat Gardening in Central New York* chapter of the national organization *Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes*.

She has written numerous articles about habitat gardening for various publications and frequently gives

presentations to garden groups, conferences, at libraries, and at colleges.

She is creator and webmaster of the websites *Our Habitat Garden* at <https://ourhabitatgarden.org> and *Our Edible Garden* at <http://www.ourediblegarden.org>.

Her yard is certified as Monarch Waystation #581 by MonarchWatch and as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat #27815 by the National Wildlife Federation (since renamed “Certified Wildlife Habitat”).

Her education includes:

B.A. in Science and Math from Binghamton University
M.S. in Computer Engineering from Syracuse University
Ph.D. in Education from Syracuse University.

She is married, resides in Syracuse, N.Y., and has two grown children and four grandchildren in North Carolina.