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## Interested In Eco-Friendly Gardening? Here's What You Should Know

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By [Lisa Mullins](#)  and [Hannah Chanatry](#) 

Mark Richardson explains that the geranium "Rozanne" is a beautiful, low-maintenance ground cover plant. (Courtesy Mark Richardson)

*This article is more than 1 year old.*

Environmentally-friendly gardening, once considered on the fringe, has surged in interest in the pandemic, according to Mark Richardson, director of horticulture for the [Tower Hill Botanic Garden](#) in Boylston.



...and gardening.

“So many people are interested in how they can garden in a more sustainable way,” Richardson, who sits on the Ecological Landscape Alliance’s board, said. He added that people are specifically invested in learning how they can support pollinators, wildlife and how to “garden in a way that’s not environmentally damaging.”

Richardson joined WBUR’s *All Things Considered* host Lisa Mullins to explore the meaningful things you can do for the environment right in your own backyard. Below are tips and interview highlights from their conversation, lightly edited for clarity.

## Tips For Eco-Friendly Gardening

### 1. Get rid of your lawn

**Richardson:** The most important thing you can do in your home landscape is reduce the size of your lawn. Lawns are about the worst in terms of environmental harm.

The average American lawn that’s managed by a professional company ... is going to put about five to seven pounds per acre of pesticides [on the] lawn. These are pesticides like herbicides, fungicides, insecticides. And typically ... they put out these little yellow flags saying that there’s been a pesticide application, and that’s meant to stop you from entering that area for a little while. No one pays any attention to them. ... Most people are allowing their dogs to roam their yards and roll around on the grass, their kids to roll around on the grass. ... Lawns are really important recreation space, but we can’t overlook the sort of growing environmental catastrophe. ... It’s just not a safe and friendly environment.

### 2. Instead, Plant 'Just About Anything'

**Richardson:** So when you reduce your lawn ... you should be cutting in perennial flower beds; you should be planting shrubs and planting trees. You know, if you are interested in and supporting the environment and supporting wildlife, you know, one of the best things you can do is plant an oak tree. ... Anything that you can do to replace your lawn as is, is going to be fantastic.



strawberry. It's a native ground cover [that] develops really tasty fruit in early June [and] forms a nice dense mat of foliage. ... It's certainly not something that you can play soccer on, but it's a really good ground cover.

[I think] if we're honest with ourselves about how much of that recreation space we really need, we can have a combination of ground cover that's not lawn — that doesn't require watering and pesticides and fertilizers or mowing — and a little bit of that recreation space. You know, it's not about eliminating your lawn altogether. ... I definitely need some lawn space for my kids to play on. But I don't need as much as the typical American household has. It's just too much.



A bumble bee. (Jesse Costa)

#### 4. Consider The Pollinators

**Richardson:** Pollinators are primarily bees ... bumblebees, mason bees, all sorts of different bees ... and they do very important work of pollinating plants so that they can grow and develop fruit.

There are [also] other types of pollinators. Obviously, butterflies are also great pollinators. And people love butterflies. Flies can be pollinators, even birds can be pollinators. So even if you have a very small garden, you can certainly support and attract pollinators.

The key [to it is] host plants ... let's just use the monarch butterflies, as an example, monarch caterpillars. So juvenile monarch butterflies feed only on milkweed. So if you're interested in supporting monarchs, [one of the best ways is] to grow some milkweed. There are several different native species of milkweed here in New England, and you can grow milkweed in a container. So even if you don't have a garden — if you have a little postage stamp, or if you've got a back patio or if you live in an apartment building with a deck — you can grow plants in containers and support butterflies, support pollinators. ... The key is [to] figure out which pollinators



## 5. Buy Native Plants

**Richardson:** One of the easiest eco-friendly decisions you can make is to buy a native plant. No matter where you live, there are plants that naturally evolved to grow in your environment. ... So whether you're from southeast Texas or you're from northern Maine, there are plants that are perfectly adapted to grow in your neck of the woods.

[And] once it's established in your garden, you shouldn't have to water it. You shouldn't have to dump copious amounts of fertilizer on it. It should be pretty resilient and able to withstand your environment, your climate and really thrive.



A photo of butterfly milkweed, or asclepias tubero. (Courtesy Mark Richardson)

*This segment aired on April 23, 2021.*

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Lisa Mullins is the voice of WBUR's All Things Considered. She anchors the program, conducts interviews and reports from the field.

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