



# **Caring for Our Piece of the Earth**

## **Introduction to the Course**

**Compiled by Janet Allen**

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## Introduction to the Course

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Syracuse, NY

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Caring for Our Piece of the Earth

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# Introduction to the Course

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*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 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 – 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 enjoy 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 for ourselves and for the future of the planet. This connection influences 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.

**Note:** Most of the photos in this course are taken in the Northeast, but the content and principles discussed are applicable to most regions of the country.

## Participating in this 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.

### Materials for the following week's discussion

A set of materials is provided for the group to read or view in advance of each upcoming session. *Please read or view these materials for the benefit of everyone in the group.*

These materials include:

- Section introductions
- Material reproduced in the session, titled in bold
- Online core materials or videos titled in bold

### Optional materials

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

*It is NOT necessary to read the optional materials to participate in the discussion the following week!*

## 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 landscapes and 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 for wildlife: 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 fully 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.

# Roles and guidelines

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 other people. 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 the Northwest Earth Institute. Its many excellent discussion courses on various aspects of sustainability are available on its website at

[www.nwei.org](http://www.nwei.org).

## **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.

Participants assume various roles during the course. A Course Coordinator, as the name says, coordinates the course and keeps it running smoothly. The Facilitator facilitates an individual session, keeping it moving along and making sure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute. If the group chooses, an Opener starts the session and the Notetaker records commitments to action.

Except for the Course Coordinator, the roles rotate each week.

And, of course, everyone in the course is a Course Participant!

Tips for performing each role follow.

## 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. (See note on Materials below.)
- Participate in the special project experiences.
- Respect other participants' opinions and experiences.
- Volunteer to take one of the session roles during the course.

## The materials

The materials are designed for people with different backgrounds. To get the most out of the course, you're encouraged to read all the materials, but if you're a beginner or just pressed for time, note that the following can guide your choice of readings:

- Readings or videos **fundamental** to participating in the discussion and to your understanding are marked with 🌱.
- More advanced or special interest readings are in gray headings and marked "**OPTIONAL.**" These can be skipped.
- You're encouraged to read as many of the remaining **BASIC** articles as you have time and interest for!

## Course Schedule

Course Coordinator: \_\_\_\_\_

Coordinator contact information: \_\_\_\_\_

Meeting location: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Date</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>	<b>Opener</b>	<b>Notetaker</b>
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			
_____	_____	_____	_____

## 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. You may find this NWEI video about the facilitator's role helpful:

<http://nwei.org/organize-course/>

### Your role is to:

- Begin and end on time.
- Start with the Opening. Then ask the Circle Question, which is gives everyone an opportunity to participate 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 the questions included in each chapter. The first question 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.

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.

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.

## 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.
- 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 to the group a day or two before each session and remind the facilitator, opener, and notetaker of their roles. Also remind participants of special "homework" projects.



*Reusable name tags will last the whole course*

- Please provide name tags for participants unless you have a group of people, such as Master Gardeners, who already know each other.

In past groups, people have been interested in getting to know their fellow participants and often plan to stay connected after the course ends as they continue to learn about earth-friendly landscapes together.

### ***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!

**A publicity poster is available on the course webpage at:**

<http://hgcnyc.org/learn-course.html>

**Name tags are a good idea at least for the first few sessions!**

**Below is a sample group email reminder you can use. It's recommended that you use a BCC 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 <http://hgcnyc.org/learn-course.html>.*

*As you're reading, please note one or two ideas from the readings you found most interesting or that most resonated 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.*



# Permissions

## Throughout the course

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

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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.marc.org/Environment/Water-Resources/Landscaping-and-Lawn-Care/Know-Your-Roots>

## Session Three

Tallamy, Doug. “*Deceptive Beauty*.”  
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# 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 [www.ourhabitatgarden.org](http://www.ourhabitatgarden.org) and *Our Edible Garden* at [www.ourediblegarden.org](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 (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.