THE WILDERNESS CENTER
CONSERVATION · EDUCATION · COMMUNITY

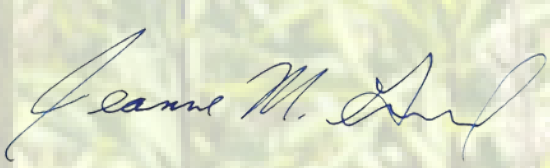
The Wilderness Center's (TWC) commitment to Ohio's natural resources and engaging our community via environmental education is intrinsic to everything we do. The importance of these efforts is what led to the creation of TWC and are the origin of our mission. Some of the ways by which TWC fulfills the conservation aspect of our mission is via land and habitat preservation, ecological restoration, and supporting native plant research on our preserves. TWC is known as a regional leader in ecological restoration via partnerships, stewardship, habitat management, internship training, prescribed burns, and hosting mitigation projects. Yet, one of the lesser known and publicized areas of our work involves supporting the long-term research projects of members of Ohio's academic community as well as other non-profit organizations and Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) initiatives via collaborative work efforts and hosting various projects on our preserves. In 2024, TWC began expanding the impact of this research-based conservation work via the first TWC Research Symposium, which brought together researchers, students, and others to hear of and learn from the ongoing conservation-based research TWC hosts on our various protected preserves. An example of the type of research TWC hosts on our sites is that by Richard Stoffer and his work on the American chestnut tree. While the American chestnut was once the most abundant species in eastern North American forests, the species is now functionally extinct due to a wide-reaching blight. But, thanks to this research, TWC is home to 29 thriving American chestnut trees genetically cultivated to be resistant to the blight. This work is both a distinction between and complement to TWC's conservation research efforts and our equally important work with local school groups, community partners, adult learners, and the general public via our environmental education programs. One of the areas of our work we are most proud of is when these two aspects of our efforts, conservation research and environmental education, come together. Conservation based research is fundamentally education driven, so hosting this work truly highlights the combined effect, or synergy, which is created. That synergy is best reflected and experienced during April (Earth Month) and early May via TWC's Annual Native Plant Sale and Lavin/Allshouse Speaker Series.

Since 2006, one of the means by which TWC engages and interacts with our community is via our Annual Native Plant Sale and Lavin/Allshouse Speaker Series in April and May. TWC's Native Plant Sale is one of the area's busiest and most successful. The sale also serves as TWC's farthest reaching fundraising and community engagement opportunities, attracting people throughout Ohio. Additionally, educating our community on the importance of incorporating native plants into their gardens and how to do so was an impetus behind the creation of our Community Conservation Program. This year we are expanding the native plant sale, speaker series, and our Community Conservation Program to area landscapers! The Spring 2025 Lavin/Allshouse Speaker Series will include presentations for homeowners on how to incorporate native plants into their own yards and the birds, butterflies, bees, and other native pollinators they will attract, PLUS presentations for landscapers and designers on how best to fulfill their clients increasing requests to incorporate Ohio native plants. One of the main topics of discussion for this spring's speaker series is cultivars: what are they, are they okay to use, and how they can be incorporated into backyard habitats.

A cultivar is a variety of a plant that is propagated, or bred, through human intervention to develop desired characteristics such as flower shape, leaf color, or height. Native plant cultivars, called nativars, are plant varieties that are propagated clonally from native plants also for specific characteristics, such as color, height, or the ability to survive blight. Both cultivars and nativars often get a bad reputation. While many cultivars, especially the early versions, were created from nonnative, invasive, ornamental landscape plants and offered limited resources for our native pollinators and other wildlife, that is simply no longer the case. Many of the better performing and well-known nativars, such as those of the American chestnut tree, were developed by botany researchers at colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations, such as the esteemed Mt. Cuba Center in Delaware. Many nativars were bred to offer some benefit to our native pollinators, habitats, and wildlife. As with the American chestnut tree, some nativars also offer protection against some types of plant invaders or disease. In fact, some nativars even offer more benefits in certain areas than their native plant origin species. Cultivars and nativars have been a major research study area for over 20 years. We now know what features to look for and where to look for beneficial nativars. One of the areas where these nativars are most useful is in the backyard habitat garden. In order for people to expand their use of native plants, some of the nativars are created to offer longer lasting blooms, more uniform growth habits, or other aesthetic traits we humans look for in our gardens. If we want to expand opportunities for birds, butterflies, and bees to thrive, then expanding the number of native plant gardens is paramount. Offering people more aesthetically pleasing options via nativars is another way for us to do so.

While neither cultivars nor nativars are used in ecological restoration projects, which require wide genetic diversity within the same species in order to be sustained over the long term, using properly controlled nativars in our backyards, school yards, and corporate lands does not pose a threat to our native species. Using nativars in our rain gardens, pollinator gardens, wildlife gardens, and backyard habitats can offer the pollinators, wildlife, and the property owners both a respite, and an opportunity to recharge. If the right nativars are used, and offer benefits most of us find pleasing, such as longer lasting blooms, more unified color, taller, shorter, or some combination of these traits, and offer the birds, butterflies, and bees the food and cover they need, then together we can make a difference.

Look for our Lavin/Allshouse Speaker Series announcements and come learn about Ohio native plants, nativars, and design your garden habitat with us.



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