

# YARD OF THE MONTH: A SHOWPLACE FOR NATIVE PLANTS ON OLIVER

By SHARRON JOHNSON

This month's 3rd annual Cooper-Young Garden Walk is being held May 19-20. It is shaping up to be the best one yet, with 89 locations. For the last few months I've been selecting gardens for Yard of the Month from the pool of gardens that are participating in the walk. Hopefully it will give us, "Cooper-Young-ians" an up-close walk experience. It is my intention to bring the community closer through these stories, not to mention entertain.

The theme this year is native plants. This falls in nicely with my selection for the May Yard of the Month — a lawn-less front yard plus native indigenous plantings intermingling with introduced species. Why the technical terms? Well, it's not too technical, just a nudge in the right direction so we gardeners can view our ecosystem without rose colored glasses.

I have always planted flowers, shrubs, and trees not really thinking about their origins or the impact on a balanced environment. Most gardeners, myself included, were introduced to gardening by free plants given by a nice neighbor or family member with the intention of converting a nonbeliever, oops, non-gardener. Usually that's all it takes to be bitten by the bug.

What qualifies as native? Wikipedia says, "In biogeography, a species is defined as indigenous to a given region or ecosystem if its presence in that region is the result of only natural process, with no human intervention."

Many plants, trees, and shrubs are transplants from all over the world. Some traveled with people to their new homes. Sometimes people crossed oceans with their new plants to remind them of their old homes. Okra is a member of the mallow family that includes hibiscus and hollyhocks. Slaves brought the seeds to North America from Africa.

The government introduced some non-native plants to control erosion. Kudzu comes to mind. But what started with good intentions became an evasive species. There is a standing joke here in the south; don't stand still too long or the kudzu will strangle you.

Jokes aside, planting native is serious business. The owners of the Yard of the Month and I have a sim-

ilar philosophy: Plant what you like but be mindful of the circle of life and take care of the ecosystem. Look for a balance. The best thing I've discovered about natives is they are adapted to our climate and require almost no care, especially fertilizer. So, in the big picture, you will spend less money and time to enjoy a lovely garden. Let's start a movement, share natives with other gardeners.

This month's selection for Yard of the Month is 1979 Oliver. It is the home of Kalki and Wendy Winter. A red brick bungalow built in 1942, the house, lovely as it is, serves as a backdrop. The garden is the star here. This property is located in the northwest quadrant of Cooper-Young. The house faces north with a lawn-less front yard. Most of this garden is shaded with an amur maple (*Acer ginnala*) and two large Japanese red maples (*Acer palmatum*). A full sun exposure in the parkway strip along the sidewalk is also grass less and planted with dwarf abelia which is related to the honeysuckle. Coneflower, milkweed, purple love grass share the parkway strip.

Native plants can tolerate the dry conditions with ease in this area. The front walk has been removed and a new blue stone cut into a variety of square sizes has been laid in its place. An ever-slight curve pulls the visitor in. A standing stone edge separates the path from the beds. A hedge of frost proof gardenias, coral bells (*heuchera*), wild sweet william and a sweet box acts as a welcoming committee. On the east side of the garden there are many understory plantings such as, lenten rose (*Hellebores*), ajuga (*Bugle* related to mint), hydrangea, and azalea, just to mention a few. Near the front porch is a sweet olive tree, day lilies, and a massive climbing red rose encapsulating the porch. Below it is another rose bush. Between the driveway and the walk entry, an additional bed was created. It is a lemon wedge shape filled with butterfly-attracting plants such as coneflower (*rubeckia*), sweet william, sedum, mums and coreopsis.

As we wander to the back garden, the overall feel is that of a botanical garden with its random stone pathways meandering to and fro through the trees. There are rock-edged beds to the right, containing loropetalum, oak leaf hydrangea, and



various art pieces crafted from found objects. The path leads us on a circle around the grounds to a clearing that is home to dining and lounging space that is created by bricks laid in a herringbone pattern that may have been an old garage space. A center bed divides the space that is home to azalea, Japanese maples, crepe myrtles, hostas, many lenten roses, woodland ferns and solomon seal.

An old pecan tree creates a canopy of shade, which keeps the shade lovers happy. In the back of the garden is a watchtower with a corrugated tin roof that provides views of the entire space. Making the final turn in the garden, we pass through an arbor with an akebia vine. It's an evergreen and is shade tolerant. More Japanese maples, crepe myrtles, and lenten rose repeat, creating balance without being overwhelming. Sometimes too many different types of plants can be too much. Abutting the back of the house is a large deck that is tall enough to need six steps to reach the top. The steps wrap around the deck creating an amphitheater effect.

This garden is a garden walk must see. Please make it to see this one. You won't be sorry. Let's meet the creators of this garden, Kalki and Wendy.

**Kalki, when did you and your wife, Wendy move into your home?**

Wendy and I moved into this house in 2002.

**Why Cooper-Young and not one of the other areas in Memphis?**

Cooper-Young fit our budget at the time, but we both have backgrounds in art, so this community has been an easy fit.

**Married long?**

Wendy was my first crush at age five. We were both born in Memphis but she moved away and we lost touch over the years. She moved back to Memphis in the early nineties, and we've been together ever since. We just celebrated 21 years of marriage in February.

### **Children and fur babies?**

We have two children. We adopted our daughter, who is twelve, in 2008. We are guardians to our nephew, age 10, as of last October. We have a 14-year-old chocolate lab, who is an escape artist, and a chihuahua/terrier mix that we received over the back-yard fence. We were gardening on a Saturday morning and our elderly neighbor raised Clarabelle”up and said “Y’all want a dog? This thing is going to trip and kill me.”

### **Tell us about your careers and volunteer work.**

My wife and I both have a background in the restaurant industry. She moved into digital marketing, and I got into the landscaping business. I served as VP of operations for Servicemaster Landscape for 12 years. During that time, I learned a great deal about horticulture and what plants and practices work best for this area. In 2011 I decided to go out on my own. I turned my love of nature and art into a business and started eScape Landscape Design.

Wendy serves on the board of the American Marketing Association and Memphis Area Legal Services. We operated the Midtown Artist Market for six years. We met several Cooper-Young neighbor’s during that time that joined our arts collective. We also got involved with the Cooper-Young art auction for a while.

### **Passions or hobbies or special talents to mention?**

We love nature, art, music and good food. We really enjoy entertaining our friends and family in the garden space that we have created.

### **Are you both gardeners? Life-long gardeners?**

There was only a pecan tree here when we moved in. We have planted everything that you see now over the last 16 years. Neither of us were really gardeners before, but we have built our garden together, learning more with each project. Her mother and all of my grandparents are gardeners. I spent many days as a child in the north Memphis garden of my mom’s parents. They had a double lot full of flowers, fruit trees, vegetables. Their approach was organic, sustainable and thrifty. I learned a lot from them but didn’t realize how much until I got into this business.

### **What are your favorite plants**

### **and why?**

I love native plants because they tend to perform well in the landscape. There are many wonderful species that have evolved to the conditions of our region over time. There are also many cultivated varieties that are selected for their strength and performance. I try to use plants that are relatively easy to get established and to maintain.

### **There are two trees in your front garden that are marked by the CY Arboretum. Tell us about them.**

The trees in my front yard are amur maple and sweet olive. The sweet olive is an experiment. I have five of them and want to see if they can be trained into a hedge by my front door, because the flowers have such a great scent. The amur maple was a gift from a coworker during my Servicemaster days. He is very knowledgeable, and I learned a lot about plants from him over the years.

### **Your front entrance is lawn free, which I adore. Tell the readers about why this a good choice opposed to grass lawn.**

I have very little grass on my property. I enjoy the textural contrast to garden beds that a lawn provides, but shade tolerant grass in Memphis is difficult to maintain. I have a lot of shade, so my approach is to create a woodland garden. I try to have as many plants as possible for interest and to compete with the weeds. I love having something interesting to look at year-round. The dense plantings also provide habitat for wildlife.

### **Pass along plants are my favorites. Are there any plants that are passed from a special garden, i.e., parents, grandparents, etc.?**

Although my grandfather is still gardening at age 89, I don’t have many pass along plants from family. I do have a Japanese maple in the backyard that my dear friend who recently passed away gave to me a decade ago as a seedling. That tree is now eight feet tall. I have several Japanese maples, all from seed. He and I were always on the lookout for volunteer plants. I’m glad I have this one that he found.

### **How would you describe your garden style?**

I like the cottage garden style, with layers of plants of varying height and



texture filling most of the space in the landscape. I love creating paths between the plants and separate areas or “rooms” to define the space.

### **Are there any future plans for your property?**

My next addition to our fire pit seating area is going to be a long fire table with a stone facade and benches surrounding it.

### **Any advice for the community to add curb appeal?**

I tell clients that are not ready to invest in a bunch of plants, or may be selling a home, that order and definition is easy and affordable curb appeal. Defining beds, removing weeds, leaves, and debris and applying mulch will make a significant improvement in the appearance of any property.

### **If you could choose one way to improve CY, what would it be?**

The only thing that I would change about Cooper-Young is the same thing that I would wish for every community. We have our share of crime, like so many places in this city and across our country. I believe the main driver of this is desperate poverty. Education and empowerment is the way out of that situation. We have good schools in our neighborhood, but do they meet the needs of all students? We have a lot of businesses, but do the jobs offered provide a living wage? I think that Cooper-Young has done fairly well maintaining its diversity, but the ever-rising housing costs are certainly pushing some people out. Cooper-Young is hot, but I hope that we don’t get so popular that we lose our soul.