

What would you call someone who had the power to cool the planet, mitigate drought, reduce flood damage and create habitat for wildlife? Maybe a superhero? Officials with the Tulsa County Conservation District would answer, “A human being.” That’s because all people have the power to help meet those lofty goals, they say, and they’re introducing a program that they hope will encourage area residents to do their part. The new Yard by Yard Community Resiliency Project is aimed at encouraging “urban conservation” practices, starting at home. Homeowners who eliminate inorganic pesticides, herbicides and fungicides and who then meet a few additional standards can have their yards certified through the program. “What Yard by Yard is basically looking to do is create functional landscapes as opposed to miniature golf courses,” said Cheryl Cheadle, a conservationist who is the volunteer coordinator for the Oklahoma Conservation Commission’s Blue Thumb Water Quality Education Program. “This could be the route to making the world a genuinely better place.” The focus is on functional. What homeowners do in their yards “such as growing native plants or vegetables or fruit trees, offering water sources for wildlife and insects, feeding the birds and composting” can have far-reaching effects, she said. Recommended conservation practices will feed pollinators, build healthy soil, reduce flooding and filter pollutants from runoff, saving time and money in the long run, she said. Cheadle said the ideal program participant is “someone who would like to contribute to helping cool the planet; someone who cares about their local community, because these proactive measures will help prevent flooding.” “Their yard can be a functional landscape and help the creatures around us and our neighbors,” she said. “When we protect pollinators, we protect our food sources. When we reduce flooding, we protect our communities. When we eliminate pesticides, we have cleaner drinking water.” Besides eliminating inorganic pesticides, residents who are interested in having their yards certified would need to verifiably engage in five or more practices from at least three of four possible categories of activities listed on the Yard by Yard website at [okconservation.org/yardbyyard](http://okconservation.org/yardbyyard). Information is also available there about how to get started with the certification process.

People whose yards are certified receive a sign to post proclaiming their status as well as two packets of wildflower seeds: one to plant in their own yards and another to share â€” along with information about the value of native plants.

â€œThe sign is important because passersby will call out to them and ask, â€˜I wonder if I could do that,â€™â€• Cheadle said. â€œItâ€™s a way of growing the program.â€• The primary focus on eliminating inorganic pesticides is a way of reducing the overall toxicity of the environment, she said. â€œBut that doesnâ€™t mean you have to live with pests,â€• she said. For example, Cheadle said, if you have fleas in your yard that latch on to your dog, treat your dog with a flea and tick preventive rather than treating your whole yard and potentially damaging the habitat of pollinators and native wildlife. There are also a lot of natural actions you can take to protect flower and vegetable gardens from damaging insects, and volunteers with the Oklahoma Master Gardener Program are great sources for horticulture information, she said. â€œItâ€™s important to have insect diversity,â€• she said, adding that using the phrase â€œintegrated pest managementâ€• would tell any master gardener exactly what youâ€™re talking about. â€œWe have to recognize the role of insects,â€• she said, pointing out that birds need insects to feed their young. Also important, Cheadle said, is not to mow the lawn quite so short. â€œAs you let that grass get taller, the roots are going to be stronger and longer and healthier,â€• she said. That grass, in turn, can collect more rain water, which improves the condition of the turf. Good turf reduces runoff. Less runoff mitigates flooding. â€œI learned recently that a lawn kept very short isnâ€™t much better than a big box-store parking lot in terms of water infiltrations,â€• Cheadle said. â€œThereâ€™s a better way. Use rain for what rain is supposed to be used for. â€œItâ€™s healthier for the yards and healthier for the foundations of the homes.â€• Residents can have short-grass areas, but the entire yard doesnâ€™t have to be that way. â€œThe prairies that Iâ€™m establishing in my yard, they have their places

with a border," she said. Making changes is about being intentional, Cheadle said. "These actions can build healthy urban soil, creating areas where our birds and our bees and our butterflies and other flying insects can find their needs met," she said.

"If we don't help our creatures out and our communities out through these healthy practices, we're making things more costly and dangerous for ourselves." The list of possibilities for how residents can make improvements is long, but Cheadle said she hopes it won't be daunting. She said it's still beneficial to do a few things, even if certification isn't a goal or can't be achieved. "Do the ones that you can, and then if you want some help, ask us," she said. "It's hard to have time to do all of that, but there are just so many ways a person can make a difference. If you don't qualify, do the things that you can do, and even if you're not a part of Yard by Yard, you can still be a part of doing things that help the earth."

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