W 1180

TENNESSEE SMART YARDS

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This publication provides an overview of the Tennessee Smart Yards program and presents an update of results from the first two years of online platform availability to any Tennessean.

What is Tennessee Smart Yards?

An education and certification program

Tennessee Smart Yards is a university-led education and certification program for property owners and land managers offered by University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University Extension: https://tnyards.utk.edu

Participants bring a diversity of experiences and a wide range of landscaping goals. The program accommodates these differences by allowing individuals to tailor their own suite of actions that make sense for their unique property, environmental conditions and needs.

Program and participation details

The program is accessible to Tennesseans in a variety of modalities, from in-person workshops at county Extension offices to a full suite of online educational resources. First conceptualized by the Tennessee Water Resources Research Center through a grant from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture in 2007, the program is modeled after other successful programs developed by Extension services in the Southeast United States.

- **Mission**: The mission is to protect Tennessee's natural and water resources one yard at a time. By empowering Tennesseans with information and resources to help them make informed decisions and adopt ecologically sound landscaping practices, the program aims to create more sustainable residential landscapes across Tennessee communities that ultimately protect ecosystem services which underpin a high quality of life.
- **Eligibility**: Everyone can participate. Regardless of land ownership or tenant status, every Tennessean has a stake in the health and quality of natural and water resources, so every Tennessean can make a difference and protect these resources through individual actions.
- **No costs for online program**: Supplemental fee-based programs may be available at local county Extension and municipal stormwater offices. Everything that is needed to participate and gain certification is available at no cost on the program website: https://tnyards.utk.edu/
- **Online and in-person participation**: People can participate at any time through the website from the comfort and safety of their own home and working at their own pace. While the entire program can be accomplished using the online platform, in-person programs and demonstrations are also available through county Extension offices, at University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University facilities and through municipal government stormwater departments (in-person programs may require a fee). Check local offices for availabilities.

Certification

There are four easy steps to certification.

- **Access online materials**: Download the workbook and digital yardstick.
- **View modules**: Learn from Extension experts (via both online videos and in-person programs).
- **Take action**: Plan and adopt sustainable landscaping practices.
- **Submission**: Complete the online form and submit the certification yardstick.

Participants who submit a certification form will receive a personalized official Tennessee Smart Yard Certificate by email and information on how to purchase the official yard sign. The yard sign can act to start conversations with friends and neighbors, designate an intentional native plant community or simply showcase to others the accomplishments made through certifying.



Figure 1. *An official personalized certificate is sent by email to each participant after submitting a completed yardstick.*

What will I learn in this program?

The curriculum focuses on science-based practices to achieve results in terms of both satisfaction for property owners as well as protection of water and natural resources. Participants will first engage by looking at their property with a fresh lens, setting goals and evaluating how their current condition and maintenance aligns with the goals they have for their outdoors spaces. The overarching context is that yards are not islands but instead pieces of interconnected landscapes, where our expectations for our property and stewardship actions are affected by the surrounding environment and vice versa. The program focuses on maintaining good practices with a better understanding of the interfaces between human needs and nature.

Stewardship actions are organized within nine foundational principles. The nine foundational principles of a Tennessee Smart Yard are:


Right plant, right place


Water efficiently


Protect waters edge


Manage soils and mulch


Fertilize appropriately


Reduce stormwater and its pollutants


Reduce, reuse, recycle


Manage yard pests


Provide for wildlife

Inch your way to success!

For each practice adopted, inches are awarded towards a Tennessee Smart Yard. You don't have to be an expert gardener or landscaper to create a Tennessee Smart Yard. All it takes is a willingness to learn and a desire to take actions described in the provided workbook.

- **Once 36 inches of actions have been adopted, the yard is eligible to be certified as a Tennessee Smart Yard.**
- With a total of 74 inches available, the program was developed with flexibility in mind so every participant can achieve success no matter their experience, landscape condition, size or budget.

Why should I certify my yard?

Citizen participation is an important part of environmental protecton efforts. This curriculum was developed with a focus on protecting water and promoting biodiversity with the understanding that much of the land in Tennessee is privately owned, so citizen efforts contribute greatly to these goals.

The range of motivations for certifying a smart yard will be just as diverse as the range of benefits those who pursue this balance with the natural world will gain. Whether it's to find more efficiencies, align maintenance activities with landscape stewardship goals or simply to learn about what plant selections meet your needs, the path to certification will reveal opportunities to grow and integrate new ideas into your yard that benefits both you and the environment.

Through the collective efforts of individuals, benefits accumulate at the neighborhood, community and watershed scales. Each stewardship action taken can have a greater impact when joined with other actions and other participants' efforts.



Figure 2. *Smart Yards. Healthy landscapes. Clean water. It's all connected.*

Some benefits of certification include:

- Increasing time and enjoyment outside
- Improving property value
- Reducing long term maintenance costs
- Being more sustainable
- Sharing experiences with others
- Being part of the solution to ecological crisis
- Protecting community health and environment
- Passing on a healthier landscape to the next generation
- Protecting community health and environment
- Nurturing nature and wildlife

What are the results?

We have developed tools to showcase how Tennessee Smart Yards are protecting water and natural resources one yard at a time. These tools reflect the combined efforts of all participants, community partners and Tennessee Extension volunteers.

- Dashboard: A dashboard is maintained to show yard certifications (https://tiny.utk.edu/tnsydashboard),
- Photos: A collection of certified yard photos is available for viewing (https://tiny.utk.edu/tnsyphotolibrary).

Keeping up stewardship practices and spreading the awareness throughout communities is key to long-term success and large-scale benefits of healthy land and clean water.

As in nature where there are no endings just new beginnings, nurturing a Tennessee Smart Yard is a continual process.



Figure 3. *Tennessee watersheds where certified smart yards are protecting resources.*

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