What is Tennessee Smart Yards?

Tennessee Smart Yards (tnyards.tennessee.edu) is a university-led education and certification program for property owners and land managers offered by University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University Extension. 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.

What is the program mission?

The program mission is to protect Tennessee’s natural and water resources one yard at a time. A Tennessee Smart Yard is one that is in balance with the local environment for the benefit of both humans and the ecosystem. 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 that underpin a high quality of life.

Who can participate?

Anyone can participate in the program, 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 their actions. Everything that is needed to participate and gain certification is available at no cost on the program website.

How can I participate?

Anyone can participate at any time by logging onto the website from the comfort and safety of their own home and working at...
their own pace. There are four easy steps to certification:

- Download the workbook and yardstick.
- Learn from Extension experts (either via online videos or in-person programs).
- Adopt sustainable landscaping practices.
- Complete the online certification form.

While the entire program can be accomplished using the online platform, in-person programs and demonstrations are also available at county Extension offices and University of Tennessee facilities.

**What are the requirements?**

To achieve a certified Tennessee Smart Yard, one must complete the four steps towards certification, including learning about proper adoption of sustainable landscaping practices and putting them into action. Practices are organized within nine foundational principles of a Tennessee Smart Yard. For each practice adopted, a participant collects inches towards a Tennessee Smart Yard. Once 36 inches of actions have been adopted, the yard is eligible to be certified as a Tennessee Smart Yard. Different actions worth a total of 74 inches are available in the yardstick.

The program was developed with flexibility in mind. Participants engaging with the program will 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.

The nine foundational principles of a Tennessee Smart Yard are:
What will I learn in this program?
Participants will be engaged by first looking at their property with a fresh lens, to set goals and evaluate how their current condition and maintenance aligns with the goals they have for their outdoors spaces. 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. The overarching context is that yards are not islands, but instead pieces of interconnected landscapes, where our expectations for and practices used in our yards 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.

Why should I certify my yard?
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. The 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. It is this agency of property owners that is leveraged through the program with education and empowered actions to collectively reach goals at multiple scales, from a single property up to the community scale. 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.

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
- Nurturing nature and wildlife
- Passing on a healthier landscape to the next generation
- Protecting community health and environment
- Nurturing nature and wildlife

Figure 1. Smart Yards. Healthy Landscapes. Clean Water. It is all connected.
What are the results?

Participants who submit a certification form will receive a personalized official Tennessee Smart Yard Certificate via email and information on how to purchase the official yard sign.

Figure 2. An official personalized certificate is sent by email to each participant after submitting a completed yardstick.

As in nature where there are no endings just new beginnings, nurturing a Tennessee Smart Yard is a continual process. 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. Since the release of the online curriculum, there have been over 340 yards certified across 44 counties. Visit the dashboard to see where Tennessee Smart Yards are protecting water and natural resources one yard at a time.

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

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Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.