



2021 Rural Beautification Award

The Kittson Soil and Water Conservation District grants Mark and Sally Wagner of Springbrook Township as the 2021 Rural Beautification Award recipients. They were nominated by the Springbrook Township Board and chosen by the Kittson SWCD Board of supervisors because of their carefully maintained trees, yard, and gardens that celebrate nature's beauty.

Their home is located in the Northwest corner of Springbrook township. They are originally from North Dakota, where Mark used to farm with his brother. In the early 1990's, they decided to move to Kittson County where they rented a home in Halma before moving to Karlstad. Their trailer in Karlstad had a small yard and they missed living in the country. After living in town Sally thought, "never again will I complain about mowing". They bought their current home in 1998 and since then they've shingled, sided, and painted the house and added a deck. This was a family affair. "There were times that everyone was up on the roof.", says Sally. These days Mark drives truck for Johnson Oil and bales hay on their land for sale. Sally is the head gardener with help from her husband, children, and grandchildren. The Wagners have worked to maintain and improve their tree row and enhance the loveliness of their landscape.

"Maintaining the natural beauty of the yard" is the Wagners passion. Sally enjoys planting perennials and keeping the yard maintained with mowing, trimming trees, and weeding. When they moved in, there were already trees on the property and an

established windbreak. The trees in the windbreak were looking rough, so they trimmed out the deadwood and planted 45 Colorado Blue Spruces. They figured when the previous trees died the new evergreens would be ready to take over. Now, the blue spruces are well established and the aging original trees are still going strong. They trim the trees regularly to keep the two rows from competing. Sally uses a pole saw to get what she can from the ground and Mark uses a lift to get the higher branches. Their drive is framed by massive arching cotton woods that are over 100 years old. Some of these trees have been removed due to age but many are still standing strong. The trees do an excellent job of protecting their yard from the wind and snow. During a blizzard, Sally says, "I have to walk out to the road to feel it". When her kids were in school, they'd bring home trees for Arbor Day or other events. These trees were added to their windrow to fill places where the blue spruce didn't make it. They also have a jack pine in the back yard that came from a school event. Sally is fond of this tree for the memories it conjures. Just like when she was a girl pulling weeds by hand for her father, Sally keeps the yard weeded and free of dandelions. She still picks dandelions by hand but she also has help from 2,4-D. In addition to the trees and sod, Sally has planted many perennials around her yard. Sally likes perennials because they "look good and most years I don't have to do anything to them." A few of the perennials she's planted or transplanted are peonies, hostas, ferns, roses, day lilies, and snow-on-the-mountains. Her favorite plants are the peonies and the evergreens.

The lush healthy landscaping and variety of plants attract all kinds of wildlife to their yard including deer and rabbits. They are fun to see but also a nuisance by nibbling on the plants. Sally puts out plastic forks around the shorter plants. They poke the animals in the nose if they get too close. Another trick that works for her is to cut up Irish Spring soap. The strong scent of the soap keeps the creatures away. Raccoons are an additional guest that can cause trouble as they like to get into the corn and other goodies in the vegetable garden. They've found that putting out a loud radio will scare them away from the veggies. They've had less troublesome visitors too, like the foxes that made a den in their trees. They could see the kits playing in the early morning or just as the sun was setting for two years in a row. They haven't seen the foxes this year, but the Wagners hope they will return. Another welcome visitor are the monarch butterflies. One year in the early 2000's there was a mass migration of monarchs. They chose the Wagner's yard as a resting point on their journey. "There were so many that the trees were heavy with them." says Sally. They recorded the event on their old camcorder to prove that it really happened. Their family was amazed by the massive number of butterflies on their property.

Sally's love of the outdoors was inspired by her family. Her father was particular about yard work and laying sod. He weeded dandelions by hand and brought his daughters along to help. Sally says it was "addicting" finding and removing the flowers. She and her sister would study the lawn trying to spot them. Sally's sister is her gardening partner. They grew up watering the sod and hunting for weeds together. Sally's sister lives in Drayton and also loves gardening. According to Sally, "She has a green thumb especially for flowers." They encourage each other to this day by texting about their

accomplishments for the day. Sally's mother loves to garden too. Even though she's moved into an apartment without a yard, she still likes to have a few plants around like fresh dill. The Wagners share their love of the outdoors with their kids and grandkids. Their grandchildren "help" in the yard by digging up weeds, but mostly they're finding worms instead. Their granddaughter likes to show her interest in flowers by bringing grandma a fresh cut rose from the yard. The grandkids even have their own fairy garden to play with and arrange by the front door.

Illustrating their deep family connection are many unique and sentimental accent features scattered throughout the yard. In front of their house is a bass wood tree that they planted about 10 years ago in honor of Sally's dad. They also have an arch from her father that is framed by woody bushes and trees. The arch was built by Sally's father, who was a carpenter, from the posts of her childhood home. They found an old cupola in the tree row and brought it out to create a beautiful garden bed of flowers and pumpkins. By the garden shed is a partially restored worktable that came from their daughter's refurbishing business. It creates a homey rustic area to work. There's always something fun to find hiding in the landscaping from a picturesque bench to rest, to bird houses nestled in a bed of hostas, to a bird bath converted to a lovely planter full of petunias.

The Wagner's joy in the outdoors and love of the natural landscape shines through in their pristine grasses, strong healthy trees, whimsical accents pieces, and vibrant flowers. Their philosophy is, "You can't out do the beauty of nature." Sally tells a story of a glorious morning when she was working in the yard, listening to a bird singing, and doing what she loves. She says, "It seemed so surreal I just wanted to capture that moment forever." Mark and Sally Wagner have created a peaceful and enchanting space to pause and enjoy the beauty of their lovingly tended home.

