



# Nature overtakes a bit of Newark



PHOTOS BY PATTI SAPONE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Ecologist Claus Holzapfel holds a northern brown snake, above and at top, he named Norman, in the garden at Rutgers University.

## Plaza has two sanctuaries that are perfect for Earth Day

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Among Newark's urban ecosystem of concrete, glass and steel there are goldenrods, blue-flowered esthers and other native plants grown to attract wildlife.

So far, more than 100 species of migratory birds and at least two snakes, including a tiny northern brown snake named Norman, have been drawn to the city's two natural sanctuaries, located on the plaza at Rutgers University in downtown Newark.

Both gardens planted three years ago by the university and Greater Newark Conservancy have become examples of urban wild lands, or nature areas in cities, where native species of plants and animals have returned and pro-

pered, said ecologist Claus Holzapfel, who has served as an advisor on the gardens.

"The philosophy here is to be able to show people a piece of nature, by letting nature take over," said Holzapfel.

While urban wild lands have been identified in other parts of the country, particularly in the west, almost none have been officially designated in New Jersey.

Holzapfel said people don't have to look too far to spot one in the Garden State. Sometimes, he said, urban wild lands emerge in backyards or in empty lots, which leaves many possibilities around the state's urban centers, especially in Newark.

"I'd like to see the city make something out of all its yards and lots, perhaps a network or framework for urban

wilderness sites," he said. "We definitely need more nature in urban settings."

Travis Longcore, science director at the Urban Wildlands Group in Los Angeles, said nature in cities is critical for maintaining native species and for human education and enjoyment.

An example of the need for education in cities, he said, came with the public's interest in saving the rain forests.

"People cared about the rain forests, but they didn't know what kinds of birds they had right outside," he said. "There was a disconnection in the knowledge people had. So this desire to deal with urban wild lands, is more for the places themselves."

Longcore added that public education also benefits [See **WILDLAND**, Page 35]

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from voluntary garden projects.

Rutgers faculty and students this week will spruce up the gardens on campus and at the nearby conservancy, in observance of Earth Day on Wednesday. The university and conservancy also plan to plant a third garden on campus for growing native grasses, said university spokeswoman Helen Paxton.

The campus already has several native shrubs of echinacea, viburnum and sumach growing among the goldenrods and esthers.

All the plants are local to the northeast, and have almost disappeared from the urban landscape of Newark. They are considered sustainable plants, which means they don't need additional watering or fertilizer to survive and return each year, when properly planted and protected.

The Rutgers gardens are not traditionally landscaped, although many of the plants do bloom in the spring. Off-season, the gardens return to a noticeably rough and unkept, natural look.

"I was here last semester, and it was pretty empty," said Anastasiya Menaker, a 19-year-old freshman who had stopped by on Friday to take a picture of the colorful, new growth now present in the larger of the two campus gardens.

People who mistaken the disheveled appearance for a dumping ground, leave cigarette butts, newspapers and empty soda cups on the gardens.

"Looking wild doesn't necessarily mean neglected, and that it's a place to throw your garbage," said Holzapfel.

When he's not policing the garbage throwers, or helping with planting, Holzapfel is checking out the wildlife. He said he has spotted dozens of species of birds attracted to the gardens. They've included the Red-tailed Hawk, Common Yellowthroat, and tiny Hermit Thrush. The latter had tried to have the little brown snake named Norman for lunch in December.

After saving the snake, he named it in honor of retired university provost Norman Samuels. Samuels was responsible for bringing trees, grass and landscaping to the campus plaza during his tenure.

On Friday, he released Norman back into the wild, saying it was warm enough now for the animal to thrive.