



Gardening for the bees, butterflies and birds

CLASSES PROMOTE PLANTING YARDS, PUBLIC SPACES TO BENEFIT THE WHOLE ENVIRONMENT

By Judy Benson

Beachgoers by the thousands have already made Hammonasset Connecticut's busiest state park. But thanks to some dedicated volunteer gardeners with a benevolent bias for native plants, it's also become popular with bees, butterflies and other pollinators.

"My favorite part of this is the educational value of the gardens — showing people what a beautiful natural garden is," said Liz Shore, as she and fellow volunteers led visitors through the 10 theme gardens they've helped build next door to the park's nature center. "It's really important for biodiversity and the health of our planet. If everybody did just a little bit, it would make a big difference."

Shore, who travels to the Long Island Sound shoreline park in Madison from neighboring Guilford, is one of about a dozen volunteers who regularly practice their love of gardening at Hammonasset in cooperation with park staff. The products of their passion, in turn, draw many of the 50,000 people who annually visit the Meigs Point Nature Center to stop and admire the sweet pepperbush, dogwoods, milkweed and other native shrubs and flowers that populate the plots. As couples and families wander the pathways between the gardens, they can't help but notice all the painted lady butterflies, monarchs, bumble bees and other insects important for pollination and as food for birds docked onto the blossoms, fueling up with protein-rich pollen or laying eggs.

"If you're there for just five minutes, you'll see that there's life on every flower out there," said Russell Miller, who runs the nature center for the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. "I use the gardens in a lot of my programs. Every view at Hammonasset is amazing, but the gardens — I can't tell you how many people take pictures of the gardens."

The first garden there was started by the Madison Garden Club, then adopted and expanded by the Friends of Hammonasset in 2015, said Maureen Egan, garden chair of the Friends group. As they built new gardens, Egan, Shore and other members applied the principles they learned in the Coastal Certificate classes led by Judy Preston, Long Island Sound outreach coordinator for the Long Island Sound Study and Connecticut Sea Grant. The particular approach

espoused in the classes, and then put into practice in this and dozens of other outreach projects around the state, puts gardening in a big-picture context of public service for the larger environment. Instead of planting spaces for the sole purpose of pleasing the human eye, Coastal Certificate students are urged to create gardens dominated by native plants that provide the best habitats for birds, insects and other creatures. Native plants can also do without the fertilizers, pesticides and excess water inputs required of non-natives that evolved elsewhere, making them more economical, easier and better for the environment — especially Long Island Sound, the state's most important natural asset.

"Everything is connected — plants, land use and waterways," Preston told her 36 students on the first night of the spring session of the classes, which met at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven. "Anything that flows off the land gets into Long Island Sound. Sound gardening benefits many life forms — it sets the table. What we do matters — what we do on an individual level."

Preston began offering the classes at different coastal locations annually in 2013, each year bringing in up to three dozen new students, many of them graduates of Master Gardener programs looking to take their avocation to the next level. The evening classes consist of four three-hour sessions over two weeks. Each one features speakers with expertise in wildlife, soil care, organic landscaping, the Long Island Sound estuary and successful programs that embody the Coastal Certificate approach.

"The whole idea was to bring experts from academia, experts from the field and industry practitioners in with something to share that's all tied to water quality," Preston said.

At the end of the four classes, students are asked to develop an outreach project that will share what they've learned with the public, and are invited on a field trip to an interesting natural site. This year's class visited Horse Island, one of the Thimble Islands in Branford harbor that is owned by Yale University. The program culminated with a graduation ceremony in October.

"The people who take this class tend to be lifelong learners,"

said Preston. “They become the people who diffuse the information to others in their outreach projects.”

Jack Leary is a retired Pfizer chemist who took the class because he and his wife both love gardening but also love the Sound. They’ve been transitioning their small yard in downtown Mystic to an organic landscape, he said, with more native plants and less lawn, and are already seeing the benefits.

“We’re definitely seeing an increase in pollinators in our yard, which is great,” he said. “This class is reinforcing what we’re already doing, and giving me some new ideas.”

For this year’s class, Preston chose the theme of the American lawn as the opposite of landscapes that contribute to the larger environment. She traced its roots in feudal Europe then recounted the development of the lawnmower in America and the sociology of private yards with their perpetual maintenance requirements. Building from there, she advocated that lawns be understood for what they are — “not that interesting, very resource intensive and pervasive” outdoor spaces that fragment natural habitats.

Guest speakers included Mary-beth Hart of DEEP, who explained efforts to encourage cities and towns to adopt land use practices that reduce the use of fertilizers that pollute the Sound with excess nitrogen. Homeowners can do their part, too, she said, by buffering shorelines and riverbanks with native plants, and using no fertilizer or applying only small amounts at the correct time, among other steps.

“We can do things better,” she said. “We can do things in a smarter way.”

For the next class, Preston reviewed the “silliness of how much time and resources it takes us to keep our lawns” as the introduction to three talks about alternatives to the lawn — one a bird-friendly habitat and two approaches to creating pollinator friendly habitats.

“So who wants more birds in their yard?” asked Katherine Blake, bird-friendly communities manager for Audubon Connecticut. “Our main goal is to help inspire people to connect and restore habitats in both urban and suburban settings.”

Even small areas, she said, can be transformed into stopover habitats for migratory birds with layers of native plants that include winterberry, spicebush and other fruit-bearing plants, oaks that support many caterpillar species that are a main food for birds, as well as bee balm, cardinal flower and other blossoming plants that provide nectar.

From speaker Mary Ellen Lemay, students learned about the Pollinator Pathways project that has fostered the creation of wildlife-friendly corridors in 25 urban and suburban towns between the Hudson and Housatonic rivers in New York state and Connecticut. The pathways project combines municipal outreach, land protection, private landowner engagement and training in organic gardening practices in an effort to “heal the landscape” into one more hospitable to butterflies, bees and birds, she said. All it takes is connecting larger conservation parcels with corridors planted for pollinators

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Friends of Hammonasset President Maureen Egan, third from right, talks with other members of the Friends group and Russell Miller, far left, director of the Meigs Point Nature Center, about the newest of the 10 theme gardens there.



Blossoming milkweed, left, and daisies grow around a small pond in one of the theme gardens at Hammonasset. Photos: Judy Benson

Coastal Certificate #s

215 Number of students trained in Coastal Certificate classes since 2013

2000+ Number of volunteer outreach project hours given by Coastal Certificate graduates

\$65 Cost to students

350+ Outreach audience reached in 2019

8 Number of times Coastal Certificate Program has run since 2013

— some as small as a whiskey barrel on a back deck.

“The message is simple — rethink your lawn, plant native plants, and no pesticides,” she said. “We want people to understand it’s not just creating pathways, but protecting biodiversity. Pollinators can use our back yards as stepping stones to a connected landscape.”

Along with the information presented in the talks, students also get lists of native plants and other resources to tap for gardening at home and in outreach projects. Melissa Funaro, a medical librarian from Branford, said she came away from the classes inspired with a new sense of mission about gardening. For her outreach project, she was considering working with the Friends of the Farm River group she is part of.

“I just want to learn all I can about gardening for the environment and minimizing pollution,” she said. “I want to educate my neighbors about how important native plants are.”

Both Egan and Shore of the Friends of Hammonasset said they, too, have been inspired by what they learned in the Coastal Certificate classes and the work they’ve done in the state park’s gardens for their outreach project.

“This is five years going strong and it’s still growing,” Egan said. “We’ve only been able to scratch the surface as far as education, but all of the things we’re learning and the response we’re seeing inspire you to do more and think differently.”

Added Shore: “My whole gardening paradigm has changed. There’s no going back.”

For information about the Coastal Certificate program, contact Judy Preston at: judy.preston@uconn.edu.

Top Right: Queen Anne’s lace and coreopsis blossom alongside dill, chives and other herbs in the colonial spiral herb garden. Photo: Judy Benson

Bottom right: Students in the 2019 Coastal Certificate class visited Horse Island in the Thimble Islands this summer for their field trip. Photo: Judy Preston

Facing page, top: A goldfinch perches on a coneflower in the purple martin meadow garden. Photo: Judy Benson

Facing page, bottom: Bob Kuchta, a volunteer garden designer with Friends of Hammonasset, looks for monarch butterfly eggs on a milkweed pod. Photo: Judy Benson

Some native plants recommended in the Coastal Certificate classes:

- Highbush blueberry
- New York ironweed
- Anise hyssop
- White wood aster
- Red osier dogwood
- Goldenrod
- Native oaks
- Sweet pepperbush
- Black-eyed susan
- Maple leaf viburnum
- Milkweed
- Joe Pye weed
- Daisies
- New England aster
- Fescues
- Summersweet
- Spicebush
- Winterberry
- Cardinal flower
- Bee balm
- Wild bergamot

Some guidelines for sustainable gardening:

- Practice minimal soil disturbance.
- Choose a diversity of native plants.
- Use gardens as a tool to benefit the environment.
- Choose plants that bloom at different times throughout the growing season.
- Stratify vegetation to create layers.
- Keep current on invasive species.
- Use plants as bird feeders.
- Rethink “messy.”
- Allow for change and natural recruitment.



