

## October 2024 Newsletter

SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA CHAPTER

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## Gardening for Wildlife in an HOA Community

Planned communities are a growing phenomenon across the country. In Pennsylvania, a planned community can take the form of condominiums, townhomes, 55 and over communities, single-family homes, or a combination of these options. Many new housing developments are structured as planned communities to provide services that the municipality doesn't. These can include private roads, sanitary sewer systems, and common areas within the community, such as trails, parks, or landscaped areas. Maintaining these amenities is the responsibility of the community, which is governed by a homeowner's association (HOA).

Planned communities have a set of rules that apply to all residents. Most HOA rules include landscaping standards that are intended to maintain property values within the community. Here's where things can get difficult for wildlife gardeners. Many HOA rules reflect landscaping standards that are rapidly becoming outdated, including a requirement for front yard lawns and a height limitation on plants.

#### **HOA Landscaping Requirements**

The first step in dealing with your HOA's landscaping requirements is to get a copy of the rules (called Covenants or Declarations) from your HOA board or management company. Read the rules carefully. Unless the required "lawn" is defined as turf grass, there's no reason it can't include other plants, as long as they're maintained at the required height.

#### Native "Lawn" Alternatives

Low-growing native perennials that can substitute for a required "lawn" include violets, pussytoes, Allegheny spurge (*Pachysandra procumbens*), wild ginger, wild strawberry, *Tiarella*, green and gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), *Phlox subulata* and *P. stolonifera*, partridgeberry, stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*), prostrate heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides* var. *prostratum*, shown below), wild pink



(Silene caroliniana), and cinquefoil (Potentilla tridentata). These plants can be combined to create a beautiful low carpet in sun or shade. Some lowgrowing native sedges can even be mowed as lawn.

If the rules don't require a lawn but have a height limitation for plants, you can select natives that reliably stay below that limit. Some taller-growing

#### WO SEPA FALL CALENDAR

November 7 -- Annual Membership Meeting, Officer and Board Elections, <u>Building a</u> <u>Small Pond</u>. Via zoom, 7:00 p.m.

Recordings of past meetings are available on our <u>YouTube channel</u>.

plants can be kept shorter if they're cut back by one-third in late May. Some shrubs can be maintained at a lower height with consistent pruning. Vines like Virginia creeper and passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) can be allowed to run along the ground instead of climbing. These vines are not evergreen, so their winter appearance needs to be taken into account if they're used as a lawn substitute.

Take a cue from developers, who have decades of experience finding creative ways to get around zoning ordinances, and figure out everything you <u>can</u> do and still technically comply with the rules.

#### Start slowly

Digging up your entire front yard is sure to be noticed by your neighbors and possibly the HOA board. Shrinking your lawn gradually by expanding the plantings that are allowed (for example, foundation shrubs, shown below) will appear less threatening to the neighbors and might fly under the radar for years. The longer your native plantings are in place, the more "normal" they will appear to the neighborhood.



Choose plants with a neat habit that aren't too large or tall for the site. Edging your beds with bricks (above) gives them definition. A planting bed that looks tidy is less likely to generate complaints than a tallgrass meadow in the front yard.

#### **Change the System**

If the landscaping requirements are too restrictive, volunteer to join the HOA's landscape committee, or run for election to the HOA board and work with other board members to change the rules to allow habitat-friendly plantings.

Economics is a compelling reason to remove the requirement for a turf grass lawn. Turf grass re-

quires water, chemical fertilizers, weed control, mowing, and periodic aeration. Native plants don't need any of these expensive inputs. If the HOA maintains common areas as lawn, those costs are passed on to all the residents. Homeowners who watch their HOA fees skyrocket because of increased watering and maintenance costs might be more willing to support changing the rules to allow lower-maintenance, water-wise native plantings.

Another powerful reason to landscape with natives is the negative ecological impact of nonnative turf grass. Fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides run off lawns into the groundwater and nearby streams, polluting water all the way downstream. Nonnative plants don't provide enough support for native pollinators to survive and reproduce. This in turn means that native birds, amphibians, and predator insects don't have enough food to survive. Simply put, native plants feed native wildlife; nonnative turf grass doesn't.

#### Leading the Way

Maryland and Maine have passed legislation prohibiting unreasonable limitations on landscaping design, including habitat gardens, rain gardens, and water-wise plantings. Maryland's law specifically prohibits an HOA from requiring turf grass. In both states, residents lobbied their state representatives to help pass these wildlife-friendly laws.



#### **Resources**

Carex for the Mid-Atlantic Region

Cornell's Take on the Native Lawn

Butterflies: 1, Bullies: 0

Guide to Passing Wildlife-Friendly Property Maintenance Ordinances

<u>Habitat-Friendly Landscaping for Homeowners and</u> <u>Condo Associations</u> (Virginia)

How To Design an HOA-Approved Pollinator Garden

## Tree of the Month -- A Year of Oaks

Oaks are our most essential native tree, according to University of Delaware Professor of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology Doug Tallamy. The genus Quercus provides food for more caterpillar species than any other genus of plants in North America. Because so many native species rely on oaks for their survival, oaks have been dubbed one of the "keystone species" that play a pivotal role in the food chain.

Logging and land clearing for agriculture, homes, and commercial development have contributed to the loss of oaks in eastern forests. Diseases such as sudden oak death syndrome, bacterial leaf scorch, and oak wilt are also culprits in the decline of oaks.

Oaks native to Pennsylvania can be divided into two main groups: the red oaks (ten species), which have bristles at the end of their leaf tips or lobes and acorns that take two years to mature, and the white oaks (six species), which lack bristles on their leaf tips and have acorns that mature in one growing season. Some common red oak species include northern red, black, scarlet, and pin oaks. Common white oaks include white, chestnut, and swamp white oaks.

Different species of oak thrive in habitats ranging from dry soil to swamps. Many can grow to be 80foot giants, but some oaks can also be pruned to stay small and adapt to smaller yards.

#### Resources

The Nature of Oaks, D. Tallamy The Little Things That Run the World, E.O. Wilson

## Pin Oak, Quercus Palustris

The pin oak, Quercus palustris, grows in a wide range of site conditions but is a true bottomland tree. It is seldom found growing above elevations of 800 feet, or on sloped ground.

Pin oaks have an easily recognized pyramidal form with drooping lower branches. Their profile can become more oval as they mature, but their overall shape is slender rather than spreading. Unlike some oaks, pin oak grows relatively quickly to its mature size of 60 to 70 feet.

Glossy dark green leaves have five to seven bristletipped lobes and deep, U-shaped sinuses. Leaves change to bronze or dark red in fall and can remain on the tree into winter. Light brown acorns form in the fall and provide food for songbirds, ducks, wild turkeys, deer, squirrels, and small rodents.

The bark is smooth and reddish to gravishbrown on young trees, becoming darker with shallow fissures as the tree ages.





Pin oaks require acidic soil. Leaves that

start to yellow during the summer (chlorosis) can indicate that the soil pH is too high (alkaline).

Pin oaks prefer medium to wet, loamy, acidic soils and full sun. They can tolerate poorly drained soils and some flooding but are also adaptable to drier and urban conditions. They tolerate heat and some soil compaction, such as found in residential developments, but not prolonged drought. Pin oaks are shallow-rooted and therefore easy to transplant.

Long pendulous chains of yellow to greenish-yellow flowers in March to April provide an important early source of pollen for emerging insects. Trees will start to produce acorns when they are 20 to 25 years old.

#### **Quick Facts -- Pin Oak** 60-70 feet Size Sun full sun Soil average to moist loamy, acidic soil; tolerates clay Water moist Habitat Value butterfly & moth caterpillar host; birds and mammals eat acorns; bird nesting habitat

## **Creature Café - Fall Pollinator Magnets**

Many keystone plants are important for pollinators because they flower in the fall, providing an important late-season source of nectar and pollen for insects and seeds for birds, whether they're preparing to migrate south or overwinter locally.

Goldenrods, featured in last month's newsletter, are one example. Others include the well-known aster family as well as some less-familiar natives that deserve a spot in your garden for their benefits to pollinators as well as their beauty.

Native asters in the U.S. are classified as *Symphyotrichum* or *Eurybia*. During the summer, asters are host plants to the caterpillars of several crescent and checkerspot butterflies. As summer turns to fall, asters start blooming in white, purple, blue, and pink, depending on the species.



Showy aster (*Eurybia spectabilis*) drapes over lowgrowing prostrate heath aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides* var. *prostratus*)

When seeds are left to mature on the plants, they will feed migrating warblers and indigo buntings, as well as juncos, sparrows, and goldfinch that overwinter here.

Perennial sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp) are a host caterpillar plant for over 70 species of butterflies and moths. They have rough, sandpapery leaves and medium to large daisy-like flowers in a variety of colors. Native sunflowers bloom from summer to fall and provide late-season nectar and pollen for bees, butterflies, and moths. The seeds are eaten by many birds and other wildlife.

Most sunflowers spread via rhizomes in a range of conditions from sunny dry to shady moist habitats.



The tiny flowers of calico aster (*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*) hum with bees in October. *Solidago spacelata* 'Golden Fleece' (in front) is a good partner.

Anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*, below) is an underused perennial that has it all -- fragrant leaves, upright habit, and tall spikes covered from summer to fall with tiny lavender flowers that teem with dozens of bees and skippers.

Cutting plants back in midsummer encorages fresh blooms throughout the fall. Agastache self-sows readily, and its seedlings can be moved to new locations in spring.



# Fall Garden Practices for the Wildlife Gardener

Many of us grew up with conventional thinking -keep the lawn mowed going into winter, and blow all the leaves off the grass and bag them up to be hauled away.

#### Leaves Aren't Litter!

Let's change the name from "leaf litter" to "leaf cover," because that's what fallen leaves do -- cover the ground to insulate burrowing insects from winter's cold, and cover the soil with a layer of nutrients as the leaves break down over the winter.

"You know if you don't rake the leaves they turn into soil, right? They don't sneak into your house and drink all your wine or anything."

Instead of blowing leaves <u>out</u> of your planting beds, rake them off your paths and lawn and move them <u>onto</u> areas planted with natives. They will create a beneficial leaf layer in your garden beds and around the base of trees.

#### Leave the Leaves To See More Fireflies

Fireflies are declining at an alarming rate, and the way we maintain our yards and gardens is a big reason why. When homeowners fill up yard waste bags with leaves, sticks, and other organic matter, they're getting rid of the leaf layer that firefly larvae need. Up to a third of those leaf bags end up in landfills or incinerators, which is bad news for all the insects that were nestled in those leaves.

If you love seeing fireflies during the summer, leave the leaves this fall, because that's where the larvae of many species of firefly take shelter until they're mature. You can rake leaves off your paths and lawn and move them to create a beneficial leaf layer in your garden beds and around the bases of trees. Leaving the leaves benefits fireflies as well as dozens of other wildlife species that depend on this protected layer to survive. If you reduce areas of mowed grass and increase leaf-covered ground, you'll see more fireflies.

If you don't rake or blow the leaves off your lawn, can you chop them up with your mower? That's like

asking if someone can run a backhoe through your house. Butterflies and other insects that overwinter in those leaves won't survive the mower blades.

#### Save the Stems

Most of our native butterflies and moths don't migrate with the seasons the way monarchs do; they overwinter right here, in our yards. They need fallen leaves and hollow stems to protect them over winter. If you need to cut down spent stems that are too tall to stay in place all winter, cut them to 12" and leave the cut stems on the ground. This will allow overwintering insects to survive.

#### Plant More Natives!

Native plants co-evolved with the local fauna to provide them with food and habitat. It's all about relationships. Native plants naturally provide all the services that people try to emulate after we've removed natives from the land. Native plants filter our water and air, provide shade and windbreaks, prevent soil erosion and provide additional nutrients, and provide food and shelter for people, animals, and insects.

How can you add natives to your property?

- Plant in layers to provide food and habitat in all four seasons. Nature fills spaces with plants from top (canopy trees) to bottom (groundcover plants).
- Plant in communities. Natives grow well with companions that thrive in similar soil and moisture conditions. <u>Essential Native Trees and</u> <u>Shrubs for the Eastern United States</u> offers companion plant suggestions with each entry.
- Instead of raking leaves off your lawn, convert those areas to native plantings. Let the fallen leaves and spent stems remain on the ground to enrich the soil and provide food and habitat for more native insects.

Native insects play significant roles in our ecosystem as pollinators, prey, and indicators of environmental health. When we understand and protect the natural processes that sustain these species, we are protecting vital ecosystems. We can't live without healthy ecosystems that provide essential services like clean air and water, flood control, pollination of crops, and natural beauty that enhances our quality of life.

## **Fall Planting Tips**

Fall is a great season to plant more natives. You've probably been making mental notes all season about where you'd like to add plants. If you've been transplanting volunteers into plug flats all summer, it's time to plant them out.

Temperatures are cooler, so transplants won't be heat-stressed. Since the summer has been so dry, you'll need to water them at least once a week. Water in a wide circle around each plant, making sure the soil all around the root ball (not just in the planting hole) is damp when you're finished.

Fall transplants will continue to develop roots until the soil starts to freeze, which gives your new plants at least two months to get acclimated. Top growth might start to disappear, especially once there's a frost, but the roots will continue to grow until the soil cools down.

You can help keep the soil warm by mulching with an inch of wood chips or fallen leaves. Bare soil will cool down faster once temperatures start to fall, and in spring it will invite weed seeds to sprout.

If you use fallen leaves to mulch, you can pile them several inches high, because they'll lose volume as they decompose. Avoid commercial mulch, especially finely ground products, because they tend to form a mat that prevents rain from soaking in.

Once the soil freezes, check your transplants for frost heaving. Moisture in the ground expands as it freezes. This causes recently disturbed soil to move and can push root balls to the surface, where they dry out rapidly. You can resettle smaller frostheaved plants by gently pushing them back into place. For larger plants, use a trowel or small shovel to replace the root ball at the correct depth and cover it with soil.

Once a deciduous plant has lost its leaves, it won't need supplemental water over the winter. Transplants that remain evergreen should not be allowed to dry out during their first winter. They won't need as much water, since the leaves or needles have a protective surface layer that slows moisture loss. However, a cold dry winter will cause stress, and transplants haven't yet developed an extensive root system to find and store water.

Snow provides enough moisture for dormant plants and evergreens. However, if snow cover is gone by early spring, your fall transplants could dry out when sunny days warm the soil and signal them to start growing again. Pay particular attention to soil moisture next spring for these transplants.

#### Fill Empty Spaces with Grasses and Sedges

Empty spaces in planting designs are particularly noticeable now that perennials are starting to go dormant. Although small patches of bare earth are important for ground-nesting and hibernating insects, larger areas of exposed soils are vulnerable to washouts and erosion. In addition, bare areas give dormant weed seeds a head start next spring.

Cool season grasses are great additions to a design. They keep their presence well into winter and green up quickly in the spring, holding valuable soil and nutrients in place. Native grasses, sedges, and rushes provide important food and habitat for insects, birds, and animals, particularly in fall when other perennials are fading. Fall is a great time to add these important natives to your garden.

Native grasses that blend well with other perennials include little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), purple love grass (*Eragrostis spectabilis*), wavy hairgrass (*Deschampsia flexuosa*), tufted hairgrass (*D. cespitosa*), and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepsis*).



Individual grasses and sedges in a mixed perennial planting provide visual contrast as well as bright green, tan, or blue accents. A single little bluestem is substantial enough to blend well with *Monarda*, *Zizia*, and *Penstemon* (above).

Sedges, including *Carex woodii*, C. *radiata*, *C. appalachia*, *C. pennsylvanica*, *C. muskingumensis*, and *C. flaccosperma*, are also great blenders. They work with other low growers (e.g., *Penstemon* and *Zizia*) and under taller plants that become leggy and bare at the base (e.g., *Agastache* and *Monarda*).

### Invasive Species Alert -- Vinca Minor

Now that plants are dying back in preparation for winter, the ground is visible again and could reveal invasives that you thought had been vanquished. Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) is a popular nonnative groundcover that finds its way onto many properties, whether originally invited or uninvited.

Anyone who has battled an infestation of *Vinca* is amazed that gardeners would actually purchase this plant, because it's such a vigorous spreader. With cultivars featuring gold-flashed leaves, silver-edged leaves, white flowers, and even double flowers, *Vinca* is touted in the trade as a valuable ornamental evergreen groundcover and even a pot-filler.

Our most common encounter with *Vinca* is when we're rewilding previously cultivated areas. Many traditional flower beds include *Vinca minor*, and since it spreads easily in almost any soil, it's a frequent escapee from its original locations.

Unfortunately, *Vinca* also escapes into natural areas, spreading from adjacent residential properties and abandoned home sites. Its rapid growth and ability to root at the stem nodes enable *Vinca* to become a problem in just one season. *Vinca* thrives everywhere from edge habitat to the forest floor. It can form extensive mats that displace native herbaceous and woody plants (below).



#### **Identification**

Vinca minor is a trailing, mostly evergreen groundcover. Leaves are small, opposite, glossy, and either deep green or green flashed or bordered with gold or silver. The small lavender (or occasionally white) flowers appear in spring and have five petals that form a distinctive star pattern at the center. The good news is that *Vinca minor* doesn't have native look-alikes. If you see a groundcover that looks like *Vinca*, it probably is, and you can safely remove



#### <u>Control</u>

it.

Vinca can be removed by hand, but the slender roots are prone to breaking off at ground level. Plants are likely to re-sprout from root nodes that remain in the ground. Shallow digging is more effective at removing all the roots. Mowing and weed-whacking are not effective long-term control strategies because they leave root nodes in the ground. Smothering with cardboard topped with wood chips is effective for large, monoculture infestations.

*Vinca* can thrive in deep shade under your native plants, but once the majority of the investation has been removed, the few re-sprouts that appear during the growing season are easily removed.

#### Native Alternatives

Fortunately, there are several great shade-loving native groundcovers to replace *Vinca minor*:

- *Phlox stolonifera* (creeping phlox). Mostly evergreen foliage on creeping plants that form a mat in part to full shade; purple flowers in spring.
- *Tiarella cordifonia* (foamflower). Sometimes evergreen, solid green or variegated leaves, delicate spikes of white or pink-tinged flowers in mid-spring; spreads by runners in part to full shade and moist soil.
- *Pachysandra procumbens*. Large mottled coarsely toothed semi-evergreen leaves on fleshy, erect stems; short spikes of fragrant white flowers in spring; spreads slowly in shade.
- Asarum canadense (wild ginger). Large heartshaped glossy green leaves on short, fleshy stems; dark red flowers in spring are almost hidden under the leaves; thrives in shade and moist soil; seeds are spread by ants.

#### **Take Action To Protect Pollinators**

In Pennsylvania, state agencies currently lack the authority to protect native insects, including bees and butterflies. These vital pollinators are in decline across the country. This regulatory gap leaves many species vulnerable to extinction and limits the state's ability to prevent population losses.

- Pennsylvania is home to 77 threatened land-dwelling insect species, including the monarch butterfly and American bumble bee two pollinators in severe decline under consideration for federal protection. DCNR is the state agency best-suited to proactively protect imperiled insect species but lacks legislative authority to do so.
- Until a state agency can list insects as state-threatened or endangered species, **Pennsylvania cannot take** advantage of federal funds to protect at-risk insects.

Most states can actively work to recover threatened insect species, but Pennsylvania can't. <u>HB2471</u> can change this.

Ask your state legislators to support HB 2471 to add protection for native insects to Pennsylvania's Wild Resource Conservation Act. You can find contact information for your local representatives <u>here</u>.

#### **Chapter Elections**

Chapter members will vote to elect officers and the Board of Directors for 2025 at the **November 7 chapter meeting**. You must be a current chapter member to vote. Each member is entitled to one vote. **Votes will be accepted via email until Nov. 6** at <u>wildonesofsepa@gmail.com</u>.

Slate of officers:	e of officers: President: Rick Smith		Treasurer: Denise Everett		
Secretary: Susan Caughlan		Membership Chair: Judy Balock			
<u>Slate of Board me</u>	embers:	Judy Balock	Susan Caughlan	Denise Everett	
		Jessie Shiffler	Marilyn Smith*	Rick Smith*	*not related

#### **Events and Educational Opportunities**

- Oct. 17 Plug into the Wet Meadow Matrix, Jenkins Arboretum webinar, 7:00 p.m.
- Oct. 17 Exploring Shenks Ferry Wildflower Preserve and Enola Low Grade. Shenks Ferry Wildflower Preserve, 857 Green Hill Rd, South Conestoga, PA. 6:00 p.m.
- Oct. 19 <u>Amsonia for Every Garden</u>. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin DE. 1:00 p.m.
- Oct. 24 Matrix Landscape Design. Wild Ones webinar, 7:00 p.m.
- Oct. 25 <u>Native Plants for All Seasons</u>. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin DE. 1:00 p.m.
- Oct. 26 Backyard Nursery: Growing Native Trees. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin DE. 10:00 a.m.
- Oct. 26 <u>Native Plant Sale</u>. Valley Forge Audubon. Catov Park Pavilion, 71 W. Boot Rd, West Chester, PA. 12:00 2:00 p.m.
- Oct. 26 <u>Helping Wildlife Through the Winter</u>. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin DE. 11:30 a.m.
- Oct. 29 <u>Meadowcraft Across Regions: Native Plant Communities Meet Globalized Vegetation</u>. New Directions in American Landscape webinar, 1:00 p.m.
- Oct. 30 <u>At Home with Nature: Beauty, Ecology, and Experience</u>. New Directions in American Landscape webinar, 6:00 p.m.
- **Oct. 31** <u>Bringing Back the American Chestnut</u>. Bowman's Hill Wildlife Preserve webinar, 7:00 p.m.
- **Nov. 1** <u>Creating and Enjoying a Bird Oasis</u>. New Directions in American Landscape webinar, 3:00 p.m.
- **Nov. 2** <u>Knowing Native Plants: From Flowers to Seed</u>. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve webinar, 1:00 p.m.
- **Nov. 7** <u>Cultivating a Native Lawn</u>. Mt. Cuba Center webinar, 6:00 p.m.