

COUNTY OF MERCER

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PARK COMMISSION INCREASES POLLINATOR INITIATIVE

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP – The blueberry became the State Fruit of New Jersey in 2004, after a campaign led by Ocean County elementary school students. But the blueberry would not be as plentiful as it is without the help of the State Bug, the honeybee, which was given that distinguished designation because of the important role it plays as a pollinator.

Both benefit from the Mercer County Park Commission’s efforts to create better habitats for pollinators in its parks, which are vital to the survival of insects and small mammals that pollinate flowering plants. Although sometimes taken for granted – or even considered a nuisance -- bees, bats, and other pollinators are responsible for approximately one third of the food we consume.

“Mercer County has acquired 10,000 acres of open space from Baldpate Mountain in the northern part of the county to Roebling Park in the south,” said County Executive Brian M. Hughes. “We are committed to caring for our parks and natural lands responsibly, and this project is a good example that will benefit both wildlife and our constituents in and around Mercer County.”

Stewardship efforts are revving up in the area and around the country as there has been a startling 50 percent decrease in bee populations since 1974 due to the influence of climate change and other factors.

“Our Stewardship Department worked with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to plan the conversion of lawn to pollinator habitat,” said Aaron T. Watson, Executive Director of the Mercer County Park Commission. “We are in the process of turning more than 31 acres of non-native grasses into beautiful, functional meadows.”

Pollinator habitat that is being created by the Park Commission’s stewardship team is not just functional. The converted meadows provide beauty, increase water retention during storms, reduce carbon emissions, and require less time for maintenance. In numerous parks, native grasses and wildflowers now cover areas that were once lawns made up of non-native grasses.

Beneficial native species like common milkweed, which serves as the host plant for Monarch Butterflies, purple cornflower and blue mistflower have been included in the meadow seed mixes that are planted to establish the meadows.

Areas where the transformations are taking place include Mercer County Park, where the Hughes Drive entrance may look barren right now, but within the next few years will spring up with wildflowers and native grasses that will provide important resources like nectar and habitat for local pollinators. Be on the lookout for Virginia mountain mint, black-eyed Susan, and smooth blue aster.

The Park Commission will continue this effort to grow pollinator meadow installations throughout our beautiful county and we are actively engaging and encouraging our towns to consider this important initiative. A small area at South Riverwalk Park buzzes with bees each summer, thanks to a pollinator “pocket” at the park by the river in Trenton. Baldpate Mountain in Hopewell Township has wide expanses of meadow, as does Mercer Meadows in Hopewell and Lawrence. In the works are areas at Rosedale Park in Pennington, Roebling Park in Hamilton, and the Assunpink Greenway in West Windsor.

Take a drive or stroll by and watch the amazing transformations as the Park Commission does its part in providing habitat for our pollinator friends.

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