

“Bee-utiful Collaboration Groups Work Together to Attract Pollinators”



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Pollinators are critical to the planet, thus, representatives of three local towns are collaborating in an effort to protect them as the spring season approaches. "Pollinators are part of the ecosystem and they're disappearing. We're kind of at this tipping point," Mansfield Sustainability Committee member and town staff representative Virginia "Ginny" Walton said.

Examples of pollinators are bees, hummingbirds and butterflies, creatures that sustain themselves off flora and fauna, spreading pollen in the process and ensuring healthy growing environments for all.

In an effort to help pollinators thrive in the region, the Mansfield Sustainability Committee recently hosted its first of many pollinator conservation collaboration special meetings between the towns of Chaplin, Mansfield and Windham.

A lengthy discussion ensued, leaving the collaboration with ample work to be done before its next upcoming meeting March 24 at 5 p. m. "This is the beginning, but there's three towns interested in this project and there's a lot of leg work that needs to happen," Walton said. "Sustainable CT really is the backbone behind us because they encourage collaboration and they have supportive resources."

Several area committees, commissions, clubs and organizations were represented during the last meeting March 3, including Sustainable CT/ Windham, the Chaplin Community and Economic Development Commission, Joshua's Tract Conservation and Historic Trust, E. O. Smith High School's Leo Club, the Mansfield Agriculture Committee, Mansfield Parks and Natural Resources Committee and the Mansfield Conservation Commission.

This preliminary meeting hosted nearly 20 active participants, while members of the public were able to call in and listen live. "We're looking forward to making this a regional effort and I'm getting lots of favorable input from people in the public in general. They're all wanting to help, so I'm really excited," Sustainable CT/ Windham member Jean de Smet said following the meeting.

A big discussion topic was how to get involved in the Pollinator Pathways project, found online at pollinator-pathway.org. It is a volunteer- lead project initiated in 2017 in Wilton and has since been established in more than 200 towns in Connecticut, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The project aims to establish a series of continuous corridors for pollinators to be able to find suitable habitat and food sources throughout the spring and summer seasons.

"The butterflies, the hummingbirds and all of the other pollinators have to be able to travel from place to place to eat, so they need a safe corridor. Monarch (butterflies), we all know, go all the way to Mexico, but they have to go through Willimantic to get there and we want to make their journey safe and easy," de Smet explained.

On the pollinator conservation collaboration's agenda for its March 24 meeting, the group plans to discuss how to add Windham, Chaplin and Mansfield to the Pollinator Pathways' Connecticut webpage. Additionally, the group plans to discuss steps to initiate a sunflower seed distribution program within schools and local communities along with identifying pollinator rich locations among the three towns, for mapping purposes.

During last week's meeting, members spoke about the importance of individual responsibility and having a sense of obligation to protect and help pollinators. The committee members encouraged residents to plant pollinator gardens with pollen- producing plants native to Connecticut. "It's especially challenging to many cities," de Smet said, referring to providing suitable, safe habitat for pollinators.

"But in Windham and Willimantic, you come right along the river through the town and much of it is undeveloped because it is former industrial land but, also, a lot of it has houses where people can put pollinator gardens in their yard, especially on the river side. That would allow all of the wonderful birds and insects and other creatures to migrate through our town," she explained.

Walton added it is critical to not use insecticides, especially in the neonicotinoid class, or herbicides. She explained one of the most important nectar sources to honey bees and other pollinators are dandelions, which are often treated with herbicide that can have a detrimental effect on honey bees.

"Pollinators are languishing because of habitat loss, insecticide and pesticide use and in the case of honey bees, their immune systems are so compromised by all these environmental stressors that they're dying out," Walton said. To help pollinators in Windham, Sustainable CT/ Windham is conducting several pollinator planting events in March, April and May, with the first event taking place March 20.

To participate in these planting events, contact Dawn Niles at nilesdawn@yahoo.com or Jean de Smet at j.desmet@att.net. For more information on the Mansfield Sustainability Committee Pollinator Conservation Collaboration, contact Virginia Walton at 860-429-3333 or waltonvd@mansfieldct.org. Follow Lisa Massicotte on Twitter - [@LMassicotteTC](https://twitter.com/LMassicotteTC).

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