

Newtown Approves Regulations for Native Plants

by Holly Kocet, The Garden Club of Newtown

Members of the Newtown Conservation Commission cannot ignore that development in town has been carving up woodlands and wild places at a rapid rate. The Commission believes there is support for regulation that would help mitigate the effects of this loss to ensure healthy ecosystems for the benefit of its residents. Town authorities agree and approve text amendments to Town zoning regulations to require use of native plants and limit non-native exotic species for commercial development projects.

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Newtown's Journey for Native Plant Regulation by Holly Kocet, Garden Club of Newtown

It was serendipitous when Barbara Thomas, a member of the Monroe Conservation Commission, contacted me in March of 2020 to see what Newtown was doing to encourage the use of native plants in commercial development projects. Native Plant policy is something the Newtown and Monroe Conservation Commissions have wanted to accomplish for some time. Barbara and I are passionate about native plants. We are both master gardeners, educators and speakers, with 20 years of experience. We have spoken at many a garden club meeting about pollinators and the benefit of native plants.

Increased development in many towns has resulted in degradation and fragmentation of woodlands and wild places, disturbances that facilitate the spread of invasive species which outcompete and eliminate native flora. This is a serious threat to healthy ecosystems and especially to birds and other wildlife dependent on native plants for food and shelter. Non-native/exotic plants, while not necessarily invasive, have dominated town and residential landscapes and are no substitute for the native plants on which our wildlife increasingly depends.

A Meeting of the Minds

That initial conversation with Barbara was the impetus for moving ahead on Native Plant policy. We quickly realized the benefit of two neighboring town commissions working together. So, during the height of the pandemic, we conferred with one another to research, compile documentation, and write policy. And in the new year, we were ready to present a proposal to our respective commissions for policy/regulation endorsement.

Plans come to Fruition

Newtown had already approved a native plant ordinance for municipal properties (September). Work continued on Town Zoning Regulations for commercial properties. These regulations would limit non-native exotic species on landscape plans by requiring a greater number of native trees, shrubs, and plants. In December, the Planning and Zoning Commission approved the Conservation Commission's application to require Native Plants for Commercial development projects. While regulations do not apply to homeowners, we hope this example will serve to encourage more and more residents to include native plants in their private landscapes.

Monroe Conservation Commissioners expect native plant zoning regulation approval very soon. Several more towns are in the process of developing native plant policies. Local garden clubs and pollinator pathways can help their towns develop native policy ensuring healthy ecosystems.

Taking it on the Road

Barbara and I plan to continue our efforts with an initiative to spread the word about our journey and our successes. We are contacting **garden clubs**, conservation commissions and Pollinator Pathway organizers, hoping to inspire and to offer our support in developing native plant regulations for their own municipalities. For more information, contact hollyk325@yahoo.com.