

Connecticut Gardener



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Pollinator Pathways & Green Corridors

By Mary Ellen Lemay

SINCE MY appointment in early 2019 as the Aspetuck Land Trust's first Landowner Engagement Specialist, landowners have shown a growing enthusiasm for the new best practice in land conservation: transforming their own yards.

This offers tremendous dividends for both Aspetuck Land Trust's nearly 2000 acres of conserved land and our neighbors abutting or near our nature preserves.

The Green Corridor is Aspetuck Land Trust's initiative to create a 40,000-acre area in Fairfield County including all its preserves and the homeowner plots connecting them into a powerful, biodiverse, ecologically healthy and balanced zone that can even help lessen the climate crisis locally.

The Pollinator Pathway movement started urging homeowners and towns to turn their land into "connective tissue" between the protected open spaces to improve biodiversity in our region and beyond. Biodiversity pioneer and expert, Dr. Doug Tallamy, said this action is "nature's best hope" for saving the planet, one yard at a time.

How did this positive storm of Pathways and Corridors start in Connecticut? Why has it resonated with so many people across the Northeast and the country?

In 2015, Donna Merrill of Wilton and I worked as coordinators for the Fairfield County Regional Conservation Partnership trying to spread the word to land trusts and conservation commis-

sions to create corridors. Connected corridors had long been accepted as a logical method for allowing species to move safely to resilient lands that provide food, nesting places and shelter.

But, we asked, how could we do that in our suburban and urban landscapes? We can't buy all the open spaces, and 86 percent of the land is privately owned. Our conservation partners and towns certainly understood the need, but the action steps were daunting and, in most cases, impossible to achieve.

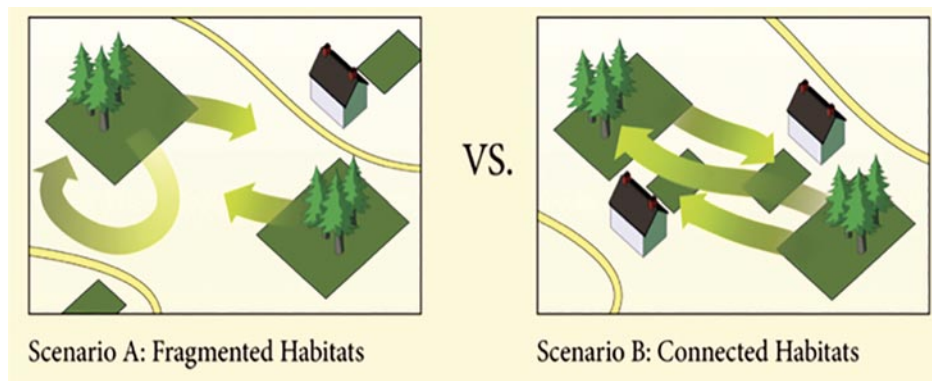
The next year Donna read about something called the Bee Highway in Oslo, Norway. Donna wondered if this simple concept of connecting the landscape for pollinators would be a more approachable method to get people to understand how to help pollinators move across the landscape. She called it the Pollinator Pathway.

More than a cute phrase, Pollinator Pathways eventually attracted more than 237 towns in the Northeast to pledge to plant more native plants and stop using pesticides. Some towns have

made proclamations and had residents sign pledges to protect and attract vital keystone species. Pollinators and other beneficial insects are the greatest indicators of a healthy planet. Until now, however, the gardening practices of many people have been unwittingly and systematically destroying and removing many of these vital species.

The idea of planting pollinator friendly native trees while engaging homeowners in the discussion of reversing pollinator decline was the right formula for teaching connectivity and biodiversity. People "got it." The message was positive, the action steps were simple, and the response was immediate: The bees and butterflies showed up in droves to these trees and plants.

I am always confused about why we ever thought it was acceptable or attractive to saturate our properties with poison, overfeed and mow boring lawns, and then let someone stick a yellow "warning pesticides" sign curbside in front of our homes. It says, "No people or animals allowed, my land is



Connected habitats across yards.



Left to right: Blue Flag Iris, Wild Columbine and Bottle Gentian.

Illustrations / Paige Lyons, Aspetuck Land Trust

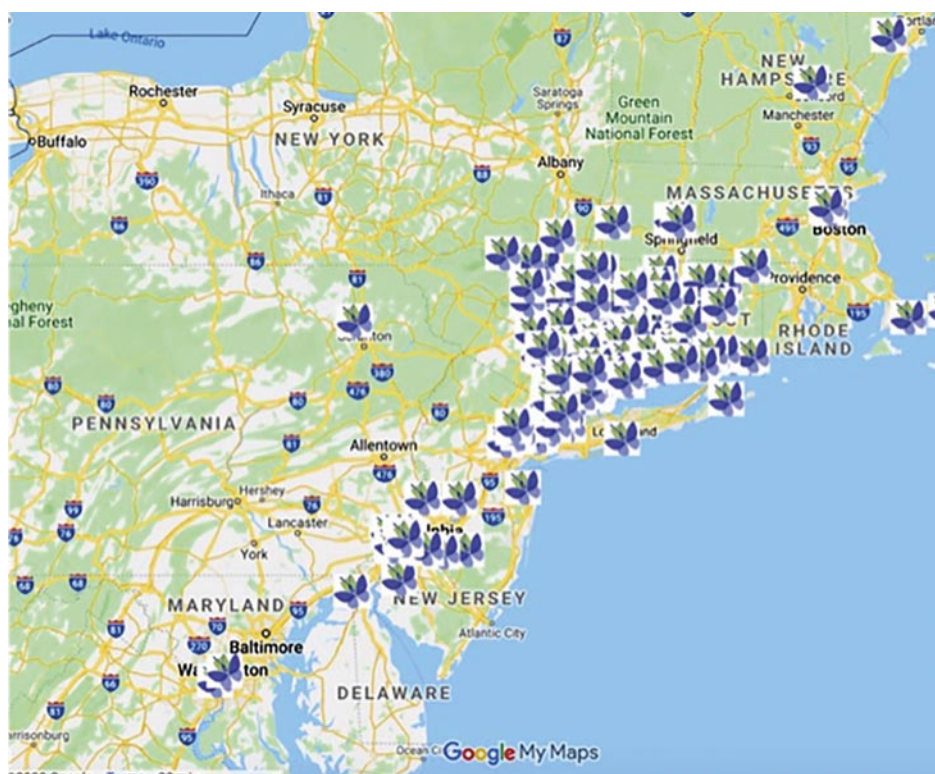
toxic.” When did we cross the line to thinking that was okay? When did our sense of aesthetics become so counter-productive?

In the last four years, thousands of people in Conn., Mass., NJ, NY and beyond have said that it is not okay. They have proudly replaced their yellow pesticide signs with beautiful butterfly signs that say “This property is on the Pollinator Pathway, Native Plants, No Pesticides.”

While some insect pests may seem to be enemies, most are powerful allies in the food chain that keeps plants and animals robust and healthy. Without insects there can be no life and we have to start welcoming them back into our yards before we can heal the rest of the world. We have to start saving the planet in our own backyard!

When your yard is healthy enough for pollinators, it will attract the birds, which feed on the caterpillars, and open up a virtual Noah’s Ark of visitors whose very presence will make your yard more biodiverse. This idea sparked the Aspetuck Land Trust’s Green Corridor.

If pollinators were the starting point, getting people hooked on looking for and protecting the “little things” that show up in their yards, would they understand the connection of the plants and insects up the food web to the birds, mammals and us? Are people



Pollinator Pathways

ready to hear this?

This is the vision that the Aspetuck Land Trust sees looking through the dual lenses of land protection and land stewardship in their grand 40,000-acre initiative called the Green Corridor.

There were many questions. Would people understand that a land trust can of course, save the open spaces, but can’t save everything? Will folks be able to visualize that their yards, schools, and corporate parks are the connective tissue between our nature preserves and protected lands? Are people going to be willing to go that next step beyond pollinators?

Aspetuck Land Trust was willing to push forward with this innovative concept of land protection for the big parcels and land stewardship for the yards. I was tasked with the land stewardship part as director of landowner engagement, “Mel, take your Pollinator Pathway success and apply it to the next step up the ladder: birds, mammals, water, and us.”

Would the Green Corridor help people understand that we are part of this web of life, we live in this corridor, and this is our food chain, too? The equation is simple: no native plants, no pollinators, no insects, no birds, no

mammals, no clean water, no clean air, no food ... no us.

Using outreach strategies like lectures, demonstration sites, partnerships with landscapers and water companies, native plant sales, people are joining the Green Corridor Partnership in droves. Increasing awareness, getting folks to consider making small changes to their yards like avoiding pesticides and reducing lawn, taking steps like buying native plants at our plant sale all are key to converting people to become part of the solution to improving the diversity of all life around us. It starts with each one of us.

A more biodiverse yard is healthier for you. A balanced food chain in your yard means fewer ticks, mosquitos, rodents, and more interesting things to observe. Native trees and plants are critical sources of food and nesting for wildlife with oaks leading the pack by hosting more than 500 species of butterfly and moth caterpillars.

Our native insects and animals have evolved with our native plants and they depend on each other for survival. A yard without native plants is a yard with very few birds and butterflies.

The key to success is connecting the

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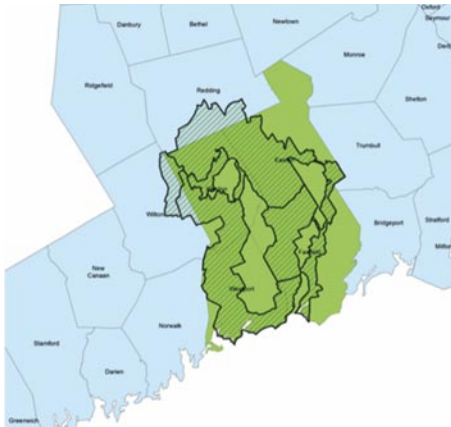


Hairy Beardtongue (*Penstemon hirsutus*)

Pathways & Corridors — continued from previous page

yards, like stepping stones, across the neighborhoods, weaving together a safe, healthy, beautiful corridor of native trees, shrubs, and flowering plants that allow living creatures to navigate between the protected open spaces and waterways and avoid the “dead zones” of huge toxic lawn and pesticides that repel life. This is the vision that the Aspetuck Land Trust sees.

The six-town Green Corridor is a massive conservation vision that folds in all species, all land, all water, all air; a diverse landscape that will get more vibrant only when we each make a small change in our backyards. The Corridor



Pollinator Pathway in green and Aspetuck Land Trust's Green Corridor outlined in black.

connects the protected Land Trust preserves with their hiking trails, water company land, rivers and reservoirs that flow from Easton, Weston, and Wilton down to the coasts of Westport and Fairfield.

Engaging people is one thing, but can we prove it works? Aspetuck Land Trust is embarking on a three-year Green Corridor pollinator study with Massachusetts Landscape Interactions and the Beecology Project. We will plant more than 20,000 square feet of hundreds of species of native plants, returning them to the landscape where they belong and measuring their populations to see what rare pollinators show up. Can we bring back the diversity of plants and pollinators that used to be here in Connecticut? With this research, along with other native demonstration gardens being planted in the Green Corridor, we can prove that our efforts have worked. We can turn this around.

Keeping the messaging for both the Pollinator Pathway and the Green Corridor simple, inspiring people through positive and thoughtful programs, and helping people to take action steps in their own yards has been the formula for success. Can we increase biological diversity? The science says we can, but we all have to be on board and be con-

nectors of people and the land. Pathways and Corridors are “no finger-wagging zones.” We are all learning together, so let's be patient and committed to success. It will happen.

Small changes in your yard will transform it from a barren desert that repels life into a kaleidoscope of nature that will nurture life. If you are on the Pollinator Pathway, come with us on the next magical journey through the Green Corridor, the path is the same and the sky is the limit. ❁

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