

At the intersection of three busy South Philadelphia streets, what was once a lonely traffic island is now a lush pollinator garden, bursting with colorful flowers and buzzing with city bumblebees.



The Grays Ferry [Triangles](#) Plaza (“Triangles”), created in 2013, has been recognized as one of the most successful new public spaces in Philadelphia. In a project led by local community organization [SOSNA](#) (South of South Neighborhood Association), a small segment of Grays Ferry Avenue was closed off and turned into a public plaza with tables and chairs. This gathering place, maintained by SOSNA volunteers, is immensely popular with the community, hosting free live music events and community festivals, and welcoming patrons of the adjoining ice cream shop and tavern.

When the plaza was created, two original in-ground planting beds that dated back to the traffic island in the intersection became a garden space, totaling less than 250 square feet. The planting beds were occupied by trees and some hardy non-native plants like hostas and irises. Seven 42” free-standing planters were added to the plaza and planted with a mixture of native and non-native shrubs and plants. The SOSNA volunteers that manage the plaza worked hard to add plantings and beautify the area, but over the years the planting beds became overgrown and some of the planter shrubs did not survive.



Our environmentally-minded group of volunteers eventually hatched the idea of creating a pollinator-friendly garden at the Triangles. A set of standards provided by the [Pennsylvania State Master Gardener's Pollinator Friendly Garden](#) certification program guided the effort. To be certified through this program, a garden must have a minimum number of flowering native plants that will bloom in spring, summer and fall; native host plants for butterfly and moths; and additional habitat-friendly features such as water sources, wood and/or rock piles, and pesticide-free management.

While this may seem like a tall order for a small city space, Philadelphia gardeners are no strangers to tight quarters. In Philly's rowhouse neighborhoods, lawns are rare and garden spaces are very compact. Small planting beds and sidewalk planters are the norm. The garden at the Triangles is a highly visible opportunity to demonstrate the ways pollinator-friendly native plants can also be used in private city gardens - and to demonstrate how quickly pollinators will find these plants once they start blooming!



Some native plants were at the site already, but a concerted effort was now needed to add the number and variety of plants necessary for Penn State's certification. A small budget for plants and plugs was supplemented by many other native plants provided by donations from



neighborhood gardeners. Over the course of two years, both planting beds were cleared of non-natives and replanted with a new layout of native plants. Today this small garden, including the plaza trees and planters, hosts two native tree species, five native shrubs, and over 40 native perennial species.



Urban gardens require close attention to sun and shade patterns throughout the growing season. The Triangles garden is partly shaded by buildings and trees, requiring careful planning to find the right spot for each plant. In the sunniest spot of all, a large Eastern Prickly Pear (*Opuntia humifusa*) is spectacular in full bloom, and a conversation piece for passers-by who don't realize it's a native plant! In fact, the Eastern Prickly Pear is so tough in urban conditions, and so easy to propagate, that it's a commonly found sidewalk-planter favorite throughout Philadelphia. In this image, other sun-loving species like Nodding Onion (*Allium cernuum*), Butterfly Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and Spotted Horsemint (*Monarda punctata*) are sharing this sunny corner.







Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and Black-Eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) line this busy South Street sidewalk, along with white-flowered Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) and Anise Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*.) Anise Hyssop is a prolific self-seeder, but we have made use of the many seedlings to share with other public garden spaces and other gardeners in the neighborhood. Behind them are Smooth Asters (*Symphyotrichum laeve*) getting ready to make a cloud of blooms in the fall. We've found that the tall asters really benefit from a "Chelsea Chop" in June, to keep them from overgrowing their space and flopping all over their neighbors.



The western edge of our shadier garden bed receives some sun in the afternoon - enough to keep species like Joe-Pye Weed (*Eutrochium maculatum*), Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), and Dense Blazing Star (*Liatris spicata*) in bloom. The southwest edge of this bed is planted with Aromatic Aster (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*) and goldenrods (*Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' and *Solidago spachelata* 'Golden Fleece'), to take advantage of the changing angle of the sun in the fall. We've used Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), Common Violets (*Viola sororia*), Green-and-Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*), and White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricata*) as ground covers in this bed - White Wood Aster is particularly useful in spaces with thin soil over woody tree roots.







The 42" professional grade planters in the plaza are watered daily by a roster of very dedicated volunteers. With this support system in place, we were encouraged to experiment with a water-loving Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) in one of the planters. It has grown well and stayed healthy! Yearly pruning is necessary to keep the naturally arching branches from trailing to the ground. Our other planters are occupied with flowering natives like Bush Honeysuckle (*Diervilla lonicera*), Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*), and Agastache 'Blue Fortune,' with its long-lasting flowers that support a huge variety of pollinators all the way into fall.



A fountain and bird bath provide water sources in the garden, while a rock area and woodpile were added to the area to complete Penn State's habitat garden requirements. (The woodpile also provides a convenient way to keep fallen branches and plant clippings on-site and out of the landfill.) There are many educational signs on the market for pollinator gardens, but we couldn't find any for habitat woodpiles - so we made our own! We wanted to educate passersby who may wonder why there is a pile of wood and sticks in the garden, but we also needed to gently discourage kids from taking sticks out of the pile to play with. We used untreated wood grade stakes to keep the woodpile confined to a small footprint.





While existing non-native Kanzan cherry trees occupied one planting bed, we removed smaller non-native trees and shrubs from the other bed and a new Chinkapin Oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*) was planted courtesy of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society [Tree Tenders](#) program. As devoted readers of [Doug Tallamy](#)'s books, we know that planting oaks wherever we can is crucial to supporting biodiversity. In future years, the plantings at the Triangles garden will need to continue to adapt as the cherry trees reach the end of their life cycle and the Chinkapin oak tree matures into a landmark, changing the shade patterns in the garden.







Change will be a constant in this garden, as the densely-planted natives require dividing and thinning on a regular basis. We have found that through our network of local native plant enthusiasts, we can always find homes for extra plants! Spare seedlings and divisions from this garden have also helped us establish new pollinator plantings in other public spaces in our neighborhood.

We successfully obtained Penn State's certification for our habitat garden in 2021, and with the co-sponsorship of SOSNA, we subsequently founded a local chapter of the Pollinator Pathway for the [Southwest Center City Philadelphia](#) neighborhood. But the real measure of our garden's success is the way it draws in passers-by (of all species) to enjoy our urban oasis! Working with our network of native plant enthusiasts, we are continuing to add new garden spaces and native plants and trees to enhance biodiversity in our neighborhood and city.





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