Vermont Retirement Home Becomes Pollinator Paradise

By Susan Basiliere

Rainbow over a pollinator paradise: An original native meadow provides abundant cover and forage for birds.

All my life I have been a nature lover and avid gardener. As more and more news decried the loss of insects, birds, and biodiversity, my gardening evolved to become an urgent and focused need to help. Helping nature has taken a path away from man-made cultivars, away from pretty and elegant bred or non-native plants, and away from the need for perfection. It has brought joy as almost out of nowhere, plants that are native have visitors busily seeking nectar or pollen, or butterflies or moths that lay eggs because this is the right plant to do so on, or birds gleaning seeds or berries in the fall. Plants are now part of a life cycle, a habitat, and have a purpose, not just for people to look at and admire.

When we finished a retirement home in Williston, Vermont in 2021, our native plant gardens became our major landscape focus. The property includes 18.2 acres with more than 12 acres in meadow and wetland and the remaining in shrub hedgerows and a hardwood seepage swamp. The house is set back about 1000 feet from the road. We were incredibly fortunate to find this property a few years ago which had had minimal disturbances and was only used briefly for cattle grazing decades ago and annual haying on the dry part of the front meadow.. We have not mowed the meadows around the house site for four years now but will do so in the near future to decrease woody growth. While we have invasives (common buckthorn, honeysuckle, wild parsnip, and a few others to much less degree, that we are working to remove), we also have an abundance of native trees, shrubs, perennials, and spring

ephemerals. Many are keystone species. We have been thrilled to find uncommon wildflowers in our meadow such as *C*anada lily *(Lilium canadense)*, Fringed loosestrife *(Lysimachia ciliate)*, Green fringed orchid *(Platanthera lacera)*, and others.

We centered our new perennial beds on the home site where the soil was very disturbed during the building process. Our own topsoil was saved and graded around the house. We marked off certain areas next to the house where we did not want the builder to sow grass seed, those areas became our first native beds. We purchased and installed the perennials ourselves. We did hire a landscaper to install new trees and shrubs. Most of our stock is native to New England and Vermont but we have substituted cultivars or sports because we could not find the native species.

The second year we had the same landscaper remove some of our one-year old lawn and expand other beds with a skid steer bringing us to more than 3000 square feet of beds, and more planned. Since we were still struggling with finding true natives locally we outsourced some from native plant nurseries out of state. We did all the installations again ourselves. Our garden design was fairly simple and mostly entailed matching plants with tolerance or preference for the wetter areas. Our mostly hydric soils precluded plants that like dry or sandy soils. We also placed the more aggressive plants such as Dogbane (*Apocynum cannabinum),* Wild bergamot *(Monarda fistulosa),* Obedient Plant *(Physotegia virginiana),* Mountain Mints *(Pycnanthemum spp*.), and Culver's Root (*Veronicastrum virginicum)* on the perimeters so we could remove more lawn to accommodate their growth. We clustered plants for easier pollinator foraging. We did not mulch these beds, leaving bare soil for potential ground nesters. We sought perennials with blooms throughout the season and with a good mix of nectar and/or pollen.

Bumblebee on Thin-leaved sunflower, (Helianthus decapetalus), a Keystone Plant. Native Helianthus support over 66 species of caterpillars that use them as host plants, and 50 specialist pollinators that use their pollen. (www.nwf.org)

We have welcomed and enjoyed plants that self-sow with abandon such as Hyssops (*Agastache spp.),* White Wood Aster *(Eurybia divaricatus)*, some Mountain Mints (*Pycnanthemum*), and Canada Burnet (*Sanguisorba canadensis*.) We are looking forward to the spread of others that were just installed last summer such as Field thistle (*Cirsium discolor),* Figworts *(Scrophulariifolia spp*.), Smooth aster (*Symphyotrichum leave)*, and Golden alexanders (*Zizia aurea)*. Our native soil in our beds has a rich seed bank of our local wildflowers so Common boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum),* Spotted Joe Pye weed *(Eutrochium maculatum),* Goldenrod *(Solidago spp.),* New England Aster *(Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*), Blue-eyed grass *(Sisyrinchium sp*.), Blue vervain *(Verbena hastata),* Sedges *(Carex spp*.) and Rushes (*Juncus spp*.) in particular are always popping up through the summer. We mostly leave them as they are part of our plan for our garden beds to be more meadow like, and only remove aggressive spreaders such as Canada goldenrod.

My favorite plants are the ones that are favored by insects. Mountain mint species are hands down the most visited plants as well as Hyssops, Milkweeds, and Asters. Wild senna (*Senna hebecarpa)* is a raucous symphony when blooming and the plant that taught me about buzz pollination. My favorite grass is Indian grass (*Sorgastrum nutans)*, which has a lovely inflorescence and is prized by birds for its seeds

in the fall. As more pollinators, as well as more birds, seem to be possibly coming to live here giving them what they need has become important and exciting.

Northern amber bumble bee on Swamp milkweed.

Our visitors have included the following and others: Black Swallowtail, Common Wood Nymph, Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, Great Spangled Fritillary, Milbert's Tortoiseshell, Mourning Cloak, Painted Lady, White Admiral butterflies and of course Monarchs and Viceroys, hummingbird clearwing moths, bumble bees such as common eastern, half-black, northern amber, possibly yellow-banded, and others. Great Black and Great Golden Digger wasps, and large carpenter bees are common. This fall we had a sudden large influx of syrphid flies enjoying the late asters until a hard frost. The more natives we have flowering the more diversity of insects.

We do almost no fall cleanup, and leave the leaves. We leave tall stalks in the spring for nest sites. We let native plants spread as rhizomes or seeds so the gardens become wilder and increase their offerings. Small birds love the cover and the privacy. We do hand weed especially grasses with long rhizomes, or if a fibrous rooted plant may just cut it down. Our lawn is mostly clover to the delight of many bees; we mow every two or more weeks.

The most difficult part of creating a viable pollinator garden has been sourcing enough native species to make foraging worthwhile, or to also serve as host plants. We also have experienced winter kill of locally purchased native shrubs that were supposed to be hardy in this zone but we later found out had a provenance of a much more southern origin. We have seen firsthand in some native cultivars the undesirability of berries to birds, or the undesirability of floral resources (or lack thereof) to pollinators. This has driven us to seek out more and more true native plants and as local as we can find them. Transparency in the nursery business is more common, thus growers that are honest with their seed or plug sources so that we know what we are introducing to our property win our patronage. It has been a very involved learning experience. We now use Go Botany: Native Plant Trust as our source for native versus introduced or escaped/naturalized species which we are leaning away from. “Native” for us means Vermont/New England range not “native” Midwest prairie plants which are not suitable for this property. We do have a few important exceptions such as *Monarda didyma*, not native to New England, but loved and visited several times each day by hummingbirds.

We have been thrilled to have delivery people and others that come down our long drive tell us how much they love the meadows that we have left to grow. They admire all the plantings around the new house and gush over the beautiful huge field of goldenrod and New England aster in the fall. They thank us for encouraging nature and helping the pollinators. We are in the process of having a custom International Dark Sky Friendly sign (with this organization's blessing) made for us since we are a certified dark sky home. This will join the two Xerces Society signs we have - “Pollinator Habitat” and “Leave the Leaves”, and our latest, a Pollinator Pathway sign, all installed on the two posts at the end of the drive by the road. These signs hopefully will entice interest from passersby for engagement and learning, and perhaps encourage even more Pollinator Pathways.