

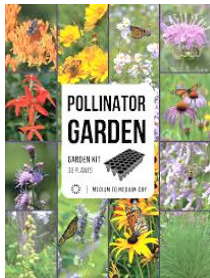


Ashford Pollinator Pathway News

By Jennifer Sterling-Folker, August 2024



Greetings Ashford! What is the difference between a **pollinator garden**, a **wildflower garden** and a **native plant garden**? This question came up recently when I walked the town gardens with Jessica & Donna from Ashford Sr. Housing. They are installing a new flower garden at the complex & were seeking advice on a pollinator garden, which differs from a wildflower or native plant garden. While there is overlap between these types of gardens, (& most flower gardens have some ecological benefits so long as they don't use pesticides), how much support a garden provides for pollinators & other wildlife varies depending on plant composition & gardening practices. In order to make choices that are right for you, it's helpful to know what differentiates these garden types:



Pollinator gardens focus primarily on providing nectar plants – flowers, shrubs & trees - for bees, butterflies & hummingbirds. Most pollinator gardens are a combination of native, cultivated & foreign plants. Native plants evolved with pollinators in the New England region prior to European colonization. Cultivated plants have been modified to enhance particular features attractive to humans, although not necessarily to pollinators. Foreign plants are typically imported from abroad, although plants from the American Southwest would also be foreign to New England. While all of these plant types might provide some nectar for pollinators, native plants provide the easiest access to the most nectar on average which is why they are almost always included in a pollinator garden. However, there is no need to get rid of all your favorite cultivated & foreign plants. Instead most pollinator gardeners follow the 30%-70% rule -- 30% of the garden is cultivated &/or foreign plants, the other 70% is non-cultivated native plants. But feel free to mix these percentages up a bit depending on the plants you like, as long as you include some native plants in the garden.



Wildflower gardens, as the name suggests, have non-cultivated plants that can be found in the wild. These can be acquired from specialty nurseries or by encouraging their spread if already present on one's property. While a wildflower garden may simply be an esthetic preference for a more natural-looking landscape, it can also serve as a pollinator garden depending on the mix of plants. But not all wildflowers are created equally when it comes to pollinators & nectar. Native flowering plants are, by definition, "wildflowers," since they have grown in our region for thousands of years without human intervention. However, today many of New England's wildflowers are foreign plants that escaped from gardens & provide little to no nectar for pollinators or benefits for other wildlife. Some wildflower gardening books, and many "wildflower seed" mixes on the market today, fail to recognize this important distinction & accidentally encourage the spread of invasive, non-native wildflower species in our region. These can displace native plants & the wildlife that depend upon them. As a result, responsible wildflower gardening involves learning to distinguish between native & non-native wildflowers. If the garden has 100% native wildflowers, it will also serve as a pollinator garden.



Native plant gardens provide native wildflowers for pollinators but also native plants & other habitat needs for a wider range of local wildlife. These gardens include native plants with both nectar & leaves for caterpillars, beetles & other insects to consume, as well as native shrubs & trees that bear seeds, fruits & berries to be consumed by birds & larger mammals. Native plant gardeners have a much higher tolerance for plant destruction as a result; they expect & encourage wildlife to eat the garden's plants as part of species natural life cycles. In addition, they often provide clean water sources for wildlife to drink & bathe, & woodpiles for them shelter in during bad weather or to hide from predators & raise their young. Native wildflowers for pollinators are only a small component of this kind of garden, which is designed & maintained to serve as a mini-ecosystem supporting the varied needs of multiple local species living in it.



A big thank you to all who stopped by our table at the Ashford Arts Council Event at Westford Hill Distillers in June for free information, stickers and native plant seedlings. Email us (AshfordPollinatorPathways@gmail.com) to be added to our Newsletter distribution list, if you have questions, want site/plant advice, for a list of local nurseries with native plants or to visit a native plant garden. Also let us know if you register your land with Pollinator Pathways so we can give you a free medallion (courtesy of the Ashford Conservation Commission).