Ashford Pollinator Pathway News

By Jennifer Sterling-Folker, October 2022

As the nights are getting cooler & our gardens are transitioning to early fall, the beautiful **Goldenrods** (Solidago) and **Wood Asters** bloom. These late flowering native plants are essential nectar sources for pollinators scrambling to collect pollen before the first frost. If you aren't sure what Goldenrod looks like, just look for the bright splashes of yellow along our roadsides or meadows at this time of year. Similarly, the white flowers of various native asters can be seen blooming in both sun and shade in fields and woodland.

Both plants play important roles supporting pollinators. 20 species of Goldenrods are native to New England and considered a "keystone plant" for native wildlife, serving as a host plant for dozens of butterfly, moth and bee species. Monarch butterflies rely on goldenrod nectar to fuel their long fall migration south. And many native bee species overwinter in their stems, while songbirds feed on the seed stalks left standing for the winter. Contrary to popular myth, Goldenrod does NOT cause seasonal allergies because its pollen is not dispensed via wind; instead its pollen adheres to the bodies of pollinators who transfer it as they move from flower to flower. It's wind-pollinated plants like ragweed and some native grasses that are responsible for hay fever at this time of year.

Similarly, there are several varieties of native asters, whose color range from white to purple; they can be short and compact or quite tall. The flower heads provide late-season nectar for bees and butterflies, and the plants themselves also host the caterpillars of the Pearl Crescent and Checkerspot butterflies. Their fall seeds provide food for migratory and winter-resident birds. In addition, both Goldenrod and native Asters are extremely adaptable and grow in a wide range of soil and sun conditions. They also spread easily.

If you are lucky enough to already have these beautiful native plants in your yard, check out the pollinator activity on them on a sunny day. I've seen bumble bees collecting pollen from my tall Goldenrod on warm days in late October, when nothing else was blooming. I also have a lot of white wood aster in my garden and am happy to share some with you -- just email me at the PP email to arrange (AshfordPollinatorPathways@gmail.com). Also email us with questions, for site/plant advice, a list of native plant nurseries or other handouts, to visit a native plant garden or to get a free PP medallion courtesy of Ashford Conservation Commission. Be sure to also like our Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/AshfordPollinatorPathway

Leave the Leaves & Stems

According to the Xerces Society, one of the most valuable things you can do to support pollinators at this time of year is to provide them with winter cover in the form of leaves and standing dead plant material. Resist the urge to clean up fallen leaves; lawns actually benefit from a thin layer of leaves. If you must clean them up, opt for raking or leaf vacuuming to capture whole leaves, rather than shredding them with a mower. Make a leaf pile in a corner of your yard where pollinators and chrysalis can shelter over winter.

Also consider leaving the stalks of flowers with pithy stems standing (Purple Giant Hyssop, Swamp Milkweed, Joe Pyeweed, Purple coneflower, Wild Bergamot to name a few). Their stems are habitats for many nesting bees. Leaving the stalks standing through spring also helps migrating birds looking for seed heads.

Ashford Pollinator Pathway at Ashford Family Day, 9/18