# A Haven for People, Plants and Pollinators

*By Regina Blakeslee, Lead Garden Volunteer*

The Center at Mariandale is a retreat center sponsored by the Dominican Sisters of Hope, welcoming people of all faith backgrounds and offering programs in spirituality and contemplative practices, social justice, environmental protection, the arts, and wellness of body, mind, and spirit.

The garden, part of the Ossining Pollinator Pathway, has been a journey through the years and an evolutionary process on this Hudson Riverfront land consisting of 61 acres of meadows, woods and trails, and open space with vistas of the river and hills beyond. Creative gardeners and teams of volunteers of all ages, including families and individuals from neighboring communities, people of all nationalities and various faith traditions, or none; and others, who noticed the garden as they walked the land, have participated in caring for the garden.

***A diversity of flowering native plants as well as annuals and herbs attract beneficial pollinators; ensuring bountiful crops which are donated to a local food pantry.***

The Mariandale garden is part of the Dominican Sisters of Hope (DSH) commitment to care of Earth, eco-spirituality, and service. The food grown at the garden is donated to Fred's Pantry in Peekskill, which is administrated by Caring for the Hungry and Homeless of Peekskill (CHHOP).

Robin Wall Kimmerer acknowledges food, plants, and animals as fellow beings through the practice of reciprocity and sacred exchanges in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

***"Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share. Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you and the Earth will last forever" (p. 183)."***

## A "Re-Wilded" Regenerative Garden

The lead gardeners over the past five years have had experience in organic, no-till, regenerative farming/gardening practices and interests in native plants, insects and the pollinator-plant relationship. It's been a progression of gardeners who appreciate that what goes on below the soil must be respected as much, if not more, than what goes on above. The communities of fantastic beneficial fungi and other decomposers, are essential to healthy garden soil, and they in turn help plants grow and thrive. It is the biodiversity and connections above and below that influence the production of flowers, pollen and nectar, and play an important role in pollinator health and visitation patterns.

The diversity of pollinator-attracting plants in the vegetable garden helps produce healthy and bountiful crops. The edges of the garden are allowed to be a bit "messy" to provide shelter and habitat for insects. There are fruit guilds; where mutually beneficial species are planted around a fruit tree to create a thriving, supportive mini-ecosystem. The main plant groups include:

**Cover Crops**: Hairy vetch, red clover, winter peas and ryegrass are planted in the fall to boost soil fertility. The vetch and clover begin growing again in the early spring attracting native pollinators, including the rare Golden Northern Bumblebee (*Bombus fervidus*). We allow the vetch and clover to flower for most of the summer to nourish these bees.

**Vegetables and Fruits:** Many bees emerge at just the right time to gather pollen and nectar from specific crops. Studies conducted by Xerces Society have found that many native bees are more attracted to a diversity of plants than they are to large plantings of a single crop. Squashes, cucumbers, eggplant, okra, peppers, pole and bush beans, peas, tomatoes, raspberries, blueberries, pear, peach and an apple tree are some of the varieties found interplanted throughout the garden. Tomatoes pollinated by native bumblebees (pictured left) produce larger and more numerous fruits. Honeybees do not pollinate tomatoes, but they are great pollinators of cucumbers.

**Herbs:** Herbs like basil, borage, dill, fennel, lavender, and oregano are also scattered throughout the garden; attracting beneficial insects like the solitary wasps which help control cabbage moths.

**Native Plants**: The edges of the garden are planted with a variety of beautiful, low-maintenance native plants like Joe Pye Weed, Mountain Mint, Yarrow, Anise Hyssop and Common Milkweed; which attract pollinating insects.

**Annuals:** Easy to grow annual sunflowers, cosmos, poppies and zinnias attract many pollinators, including monarch butterflies and several different types of skippers. The sunflowers are a favorite of bumblebees and long-horned bees (*photo right.)*

## Rewards of Regenerative Gardening

The rewards of the garden have been many. Since April college students have been involved in mulching, planting and maintaining the garden. Many of these students say they have had no gardening experience, yet they are quick learners and respond positively to the time they spend volunteering. The reaction of all the volunteers has been a source of pleasure as they observe the various bees, butterflies, wasps, birds, and how the insects and birds are lured by the colors and shapes of many different flowers.

**Watching plants and insects makes people happy! It's amazing how a walk through the garden makes people feel more alive and less stressed. Planting for pollinators in a vegetable garden that is filled with flowers makes us good stewards and people who see the world as sacred and valuable. Most people say that they have learned a lot about nature by volunteering in the garden.**