

How Two Towns Collaborated to Help Pass Ground-Breaking Regulations Requiring Commercial Developers to Use Native Plants

By Holly Kocet

It was serendipitous when Barbara Thomas of the Monroe, CT Conservation Commission contacted the Newtown, CT Conservation Commission in March of 2020 to see what it was doing to encourage the use of native plants in commercial development projects.

Newtown had already passed [an ordinance requiring the use of native plants on municipal properties](#), but a native plant policy for developers is something the Conservation Commission had wanted to pass for some time. In 2017

the town had taken an important step and approved an [Invasive Plant Ban](#) prohibiting the planting of potentially invasive plant species on town-owned properties. The ban was significant because these plants, while listed on the CT Invasive Plant List as having invasive tendencies, are not yet banned by state statute and are still sold legally.



Native red maple in bloom in early spring.

That initial conversation with Barbara was the impetus for moving ahead on a broader native plant policy that included commercial properties. Barbara and I quickly realized the benefit of two neighboring town commissions working together. So, during the height of the pandemic, we conferred with one another to research, compile documentation, and write policy. And in the new year, we were ready to present a proposal to our respective commissions for policy/regulation endorsement.

Plans Come to Fruition

Since Newtown already had a native plant ordinance for municipal properties, the Conservation Commission worked with the Planning and Zoning Commission to amend existing town zoning regulations to include commercial properties. We compiled a [Native Plant Resource Guide](#) with policy guidelines to help explain the negative impact of invasive plants and offer alternatives. In December, [the proposed text amendments](#) were adopted by the town and will require commercial properties to plant 100 percent of its trees and grasses, 75 percent of its perennials, and 85 percent of its shrubs with native species.

While regulation changes could not address every issue (for example, cultivars of native plants are allowed, and there is debate about whether the wildlife services they provide are as good as those of straight native species), we believe this is a step in the right direction for increasing the use of native plants in our town landscapes. And while

regulations do not apply to homeowners, we hope this will serve to encourage more and more residents to include native plants in their private landscapes.

Monroe Conservation Commissioners expect native plant zoning regulation approval very soon. Several more towns are in the process of developing native plant policies. Representatives from local town commissions and Pollinator Pathways have been extremely supportive and have expressed interest in our policy/regulations as templates for developing their own plans. (See a list of municipal actions to support pollinators at Pollinator-Pathway.org)

Taking it on the Road

Barbara and I plan to continue our efforts with an initiative to spread the word about our journey and our successes. We are contacting garden clubs, conservation commissions and Pollinator Pathway organizers to offer our support in developing native plant regulations for their municipalities. And while each plan will likely be tailor-made, we hope our example and our policies will assist and inspire others in this endeavor.

Why Requiring Native Plants Matters Now More Than Ever

Newtown and Monroe in Connecticut, like other towns across the region, have experienced increased development in recent years that has resulted in the degradation and fragmentation of woodlands and wild places, disturbances that facilitate the spread of invasive species which outcompete and eliminate native flora.

This is a serious threat to healthy ecosystems and especially to pollinators, birds and other wildlife dependent on native plants for food and shelter. Non-native/exotic ornamentals, while not necessarily invasive, have dominated town and residential landscapes and are no substitute for the native plants on which our wildlife increasingly depends.



Development like that pictured above in Newtown, CT spurred two towns to take action to require that developers use native plants in their planting plans.

Holly Kocet is a member of the Newtown, CT Conservation Commission, a member of the CT Native Plant Working Group, a co-founder of Protect Our Pollinators, and serves on the Board of Pollinator Pathway Northeast.