



Support for HB322 Real Property – Restrictions on Use – Low-Impact Landscaping

For years in my professional capacity, I've advised homeowners in both unincorporated and HOA-governed communities on benefits and techniques of gardening for pollinators, birds and the environment. The issue became more personal in 2017, when my sister's HOA in Howard County said that pesticide-free gardens with native plants for birds and pollinators were "completely contrary" to its lawn-only design scheme—even though no requirements for lawn-only landscapes actually existed in the community's bylaws. We successfully argued against that arbitrarily applied standard. That experience, combined with 20 years of accumulated expertise in native plant landscaping and habitat consulting, has crystallized basic misunderstandings that lead to prohibitions of pollinator gardens in many HOA communities:

Myth: Native plant/pollinator gardening "decreases property values."

Reality: Native plant and pollinator gardens are a hot selling point on the real estate market.

Area top-selling real estate agents report that homeowners actively seek properties landscaped with native plant gardens designed to mitigate stormwater runoff and attract pollinators. In fact, the *New York Times* Sunday Real Estate section featured my own Maryland native plant garden as an example of a beautiful landscape on its front page in November 2017.

Myth: Native plants are "unruly" or "wild."

Reality: Native plants, like any other plants, come in all shapes, colors and sizes.

Native plants can fit beautifully into any neighborhood; they often look like they have always belonged—and that's no coincidence. Unlike turfgrass, which isn't well-adapted to our climate, plants that grow naturally in Maryland are accustomed to our soils, climate and rainfall. They grow more lushly than lawn, which is usually made up of nonnative turf species that prefer cooler or warmer climates. Native plants can fit into any design, from a cottage gardening style to a Japanese garden aesthetic. Because of their popularity and versatility, they have entered the mainstream, literally coming back home to our gardens, thanks to many entrepreneurial local nurseries in Maryland that foresaw the trend.

Myth: Pollinator gardens are dangerous because "bees sting."

Reality: Maryland's many native bee species are solitary and generally do not sting at all.

This is a pervasive misunderstanding because people often think only of honeybees when they think of bees. Honeybees are domesticated animals living in hives; near those hives, they instinctively protect their young and their families. But Maryland is home to more than 400 native bee species, most of which are solitary and have no hives to defend—and thus no reason to sting. In fact, many don't even have the capability of stinging. Even bee species capable of stinging, such as bumblebees, do not do so unless highly provoked. A good example of

provocation is the time 20 years ago when I plucked a spent flower in the evening, not realizing I was disturbing a bumblebee sleeping peacefully underneath. Though our property now hosts many bee species, including the threatened American bumblebee, I have never again been stung by a bee. Honeybees do visit our flowers, flying in from nearby farms, but their sole goal is to collect pollen and nectar. Away from their hives and in the flower patches, they have zero reason to sting anyone. And they're simply too busy pollinating to bother!

Myth: Native plant gardens “attract pests” such as mosquitoes, squirrels and ticks.

Reality: Native plant gardens create more balance of predators and prey.

Especially when allowed throughout a community, native plant gardens are key to healthy habitats for both animals and people. Standing water attracts mosquitoes, an easily preventable problem. Native plants, on the other hand, attract mosquito predators such as hummingbirds. Creating habitat for pollinators also draws animals like opossums, gentle and misunderstood creatures who eat a phenomenal number of ticks; research has shown that a single opossum can eat more than 5,000 ticks in a single week during peak season. Squirrels are canopy dwellers, nesting in trees and eating seeds, nuts, buds and fruit of trees. They are endemic to our communities and to any place where trees are planted, whether a pollinator garden is present or not. For anyone who thinks there are too many squirrels at their birdfeeders, I advise putting out natural food instead—in the form of native plants that are more nutritious for birds and that provide habitat for all our wild neighbors.

These are just a few of the many reasons to support HB279. Thank you for considering this important legislation!

Nancy Lawson, Sykesville, Howard County, Maryland

About Humane Gardener: Nancy Lawson founded Humane Gardener, LLC, to pioneer creative planting strategies and other animal-friendly landscaping methods. A habitat consultant and national speaker on garden ecology, she is the author of *The Humane Gardener: Nurturing a Backyard Habitat for Wildlife*. Lawson's presentations at diverse venues—from national wildlife refuges to local wildflower preserves—have inspired even seasoned horticulturists and wildlife experts to look at their landscapes in new ways. Certified as a Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professional and master naturalist, she partners with local environmental organizations, including the Audubon Society of Central Maryland and Howard County Bee City. Her book, garden and website have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other media outlets.

