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Birdies and Bees: How superintendents can help native pollinators

Pollinators are in decline across North America and golf courses can play a role in their conservation. These are two of the findings of the recently released National Academy of Sciences report, Status of Pollinators in North America.

Pollinators — including butterflies, bees, beetles, flies, and hummingbirds — are arguably one of the most important groups of animals. The work they do in moving pollen from flower to flower results in successful seed set and fruit production for over 70 percent of flowering plants. We rely on these plants for much of our food, and wildlife rely on them for food and habitat. Imagine spring without flowering meadows, summer without berry picking, and fall without pumpkins, and you get an idea of how the work of pollinators impacts our lives.

What can a superintendent do? The NAS report identified habitat loss and fragmentation as one of the main causes of pollinator declines. Golf courses can help significantly with reversing this trend by providing flowers and egg-laying sites.

Even on the most compact urban golf course, flowering plants can be part of the landscape. On more extensive courses, out-of-play areas offer great opportunities for creating prairie-type habitats rich in native flowers.

For greatest benefit, the flowers should bloom throughout the growing season. Add in some wooden blocks drilled with holes or create patches of bare ground in which solitary bees can nest, include hostplants for butterfly caterpillars, and your course can support healthy and diverse pollinator populations.

"As superintendents we can create and maintain habitat with little effort," said David Phipps, CGCS, superintendent at Stone Creek Golf

Club, in Oregon, and president of the Oregon Golf Course Superintendents Association. "All we have to know is how to recognize these little critters and what their habitat looks like. When you get down on their level, you can surely see their beauty and the remarkable world in which they live."

Pollinator conservation is well-suited to golf courses because habitat can be small scale and broken into patches. Flowers or nesting sites can be scattered across the course and because pollinators can fly, they can piece together these resources into a habitat that works. For example, they may nest in a snag on one side of a fairway and forage in the flowers on the other. This mobility also means that on-course habitat will support pollinators that can visit flowers growing in adjacent gardens and farms.

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, based in Portland, Ore., can offer information and practical advice about pollinator conservation on golf courses. To learn more about the NAS report and download detailed guidelines on creating habitat on golf courses, visit the Society's Web site, http://www.xerces.org/Pollinator_Insect_Conservation. Or contact Matthew Shepherd, pollinator program director, at mdshepherd@xerces.org or 503-323-6639.

In general, there is a greater emphasis being placed on wildlife conservation on private lands across the United State. Golf courses, and the superintendents who manage them, are playing an increasingly important role in environmental stewardship. Providing habitat for pollinators is one of the most valuable ways golf can benefit a healthy environment. An acre of habitat for butterflies and other pollinators on each course will add up to far more than 10,000 acres nationwide, a significant contribution to conserving these beautiful—and essential—creatures.

Credit: GCSAA Chapter Services