



POSITION: FAVORABLE

Maryland Native Plants Program, SB 836

Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, March 2, 2023

Testimony of Howard County Bee City

Howard County Bee City is working to expand pollinator habitat, increase awareness of native bees, and empower residents, business owners and property managers to help alleviate and reverse declining populations of bees, butterflies, and other insects. We are a coalition of public and private partners working under the auspices of Bee City USA, a program of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation.

The pollinators we're working to protect would not be able to survive without native plants. And the plants themselves—including both native species and those grown in food crops—would not survive without pollinators.

Maryland is home to about 400 bee species, from large and fuzzy bumblebees to tiny mining bees. Most are solitary nesters and don't sting at all because they have no hives to protect. Many of our native bees are specialists, meaning that they must gather pollen for their young from only one or a handful of native plant species. For these bees, dandelions won't do. They need spring beauties and violets, asters and goldenrods, willows and redbuds and native dogwood bushes, among others.

Yet still too few nurseries carry these plants, and too few people even know about them at all. Consumers buy what's available, and often what's on deck at the local garden center are plants that are antithetical to creating pollinator habitat, including invasives such as burning bush, Bradford pear, and English ivy.

One of our greatest challenges as a Bee City group is to get the word out about why native plants are important, where they are available, and which ones are most helpful to our local pollinators. To that end, in our four years of existence, we've created native plant garden templates and a spreadsheet profiling native species local to our area. We've held a yearly violet photo contest and a people's-choice-style vote for best pollinator plant.

In spite of our education and outreach efforts, people still face hurdles when they head to a nursery. The choices can be overwhelming, and confusion is rampant. For example, some plants labeled as "U.S. natives" are endemic to completely different regions. More often, though, there just aren't very many native choices at all.

A state-sanctioned, volunteer labeling program would not only provide clarification for consumers; it would also be a great marketing tool for nurseries. Over the years we've heard many nurseries say that they can't carry natives because there isn't enough demand. But there isn't enough demand because people don't even know about the plants to begin with.

Together we can resolve this catch-22 conundrum: groups like ours can help fuel demand while environmentally minded nurseries increase their supplies simultaneously. This is already happening organically, but it's still haphazard, and progress is slow. Our pollinators can't

afford to wait any longer for us to get our collective act together. Let's pass SB 836 to help accelerate the process and provide an invaluable resource for Marylanders, a boost to local businesses, and critical intervention for our beleaguered pollinators. Thank you!

*For Howard County Bee City,*

*Pollinator Committee Co-Chairs:*

*Julie Costantino, Sustainability Project Manager, Howard County Office of Community Sustainability*

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