

# UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND EXTENSION

Testimony: SB284, Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2026  
Sections of Interest: University System of Maryland Fiscal 2027 Budget  
Committee: Budget and Taxation  
Hearing Date: March 4, 2026  
Position: Letter of Information

## **Introduction**

The University of Maryland Extension (UME) submits this testimony regarding SB284 to restore the \$150,000 in funding for the Maryland Native Plant Program (MNPP) and its associated UME Specialist position. The MNPP is the first program of its kind in the nation, and its work — still in its early stages — is already delivering measurable results for Maryland's environment, economy, and communities.

Without this funding, the UME position which is currently filled will be eliminated, placing at serious risk the momentum built over just 17 months of operations.

## **What Is the Maryland Native Plant Program?**

The MNPP was established to simultaneously grow supply and demand for native plants, creating a thriving and stable market for Maryland's green industry. It is grounded in the understanding that native flora is essential to:

- Improving water quality across the Chesapeake Bay watershed;
- Reducing the spread of invasive species;
- Providing critical habitat for local wildlife; and
- Building more climate-resilient communities.

The program advances Maryland's economic and sustainability objectives while positioning the state as a regional and national leader in the green industry.

## **What Has Been Accomplished in 17 Months?**

Despite its short existence, the MNPP has achieved substantial results across multiple fronts:

### **Increased Availability of Native Plants**

Since the launch of the Maryland Department of Agriculture's Best Native Plants Certification last April, the MNPP specialist has certified 34 nurseries and is actively assisting an additional dozen to meet certification qualifications — thanks in part to a strategic presence at the largest trade show in the Mid-Atlantic region.

### **Authoritative Resources**

The first of three Maryland Native Plant Guides ([Piedmont](#)) was released in fall 2025. It has already garnered over 8,000 views, 2,000 downloads and 1,000 hard copy sales, and is under consideration for an Extension Materials Award by the American Society of Horticultural Science. A companion Commercial Maryland Native Plant List has attracted 923 unique users and continues to evolve.

### **Professional Education and Industry Reach**

Seven native plant presentations eligible for IPM and Landscape Architect continuing education units (CEUs) were delivered to 1,194 participants. Recurring articles in the Maryland Nursery, Landscape, and Greenhouse Association's trade journal regularly reach more than 300 Maryland businesses, collectively employing over 15,000 Marylanders.

## **Public Engagement and Demand Creation**

512 Master Gardeners received specialized native plant training. Over 5,000 Marylanders were reached through speaking engagements, blog articles, and the 'Branching Out' newsletter. The inaugural 'Natives at Noon: Lunch & Learn Webinar' drew 370 participants in 2026 — with post-event surveys showing that 8.6 out of 10 participants planned to implement what they learned.

## **Research and Grant Funding**

A 2026–2027 MAES grant of approximately \$20,000 was awarded to evaluate the use of assertive natives to manage invasive plants. Two additional USDA grants are currently under review — one evaluating native plants for the cut flower industry, and one examining native plants' role in attracting natural enemies of crapemyrtle bark scale. The MNPP specialist serves as Co-Principal Investigator on both.

## **What Momentum Are We at Risk of Losing?**

This program is just getting started, and the pipeline of work underway represents a significant return on Maryland's investment. Work currently in progress includes:

- The 2nd ecoregion plant guide (Coastal Plain) is under development; the 3rd (Mountain Region) is planned for 2027.
- In partnership with UMD's iConsultancy, the Commercial Native Plant List is being converted into a searchable database and interactive plant tool kit for designers, stormwater practitioners, and gardeners.
- Nine county Extension offices are participating in the 'MD Native Seed & Plant Program,' a statewide initiative to build a local native seed industry and provide free native plant materials to underserved communities.
- Development of a 'Master Native Plants Program' in partnership with the Chesapeake Bay Landscape Professionals, along with new citizen science projects such as 'Assertive Native Allies' and 'Backyard Botany Quest.'
- Expansion of regional partnerships with other land grant institutions and nonprofits, positioning Maryland for large multistate grants and system-level initiatives such as a Mid-Atlantic seed hub.

## **Return on Investment for Maryland**

Maryland's horticultural industry generates approximately \$2 billion in economic activity. The MNPP supports this industry directly by expanding market opportunities for businesses selling and producing native plants, while also helping create entirely new market segments such as native seed production.

Beyond industry growth, native flora and green infrastructure generate substantial cost savings for the State by reducing the burden of invasive species management and flood mitigation. These are fiscal benefits that compound over time.

While the program is too young for full economic impact data, the trajectory is clear: the MNPP is a smart, high-leverage investment in Maryland's environmental health, economic vitality, and long-term resilience.

## **Conclusion**

The Maryland Native Plant Program has demonstrated — in just 17 months — that it can deliver real, measurable results for Maryland's environment, industry, and communities. Allowing the UME position to be eliminated now would squander not only the accomplishments already achieved, but the far greater returns that lie ahead.

We respectfully submit this information on the MNPP in SB284. Restoring the \$150,000 in funding would ensure the Maryland Native Plant Program has the resources it needs to continue its vital work on behalf of all Marylanders.

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