

Testimony on: HB217 General Provisions - Commemorative Month - Maryland Native Plant Month

Committee: Government, Labor and Elections

Position: Support

Hearing Date: March 17, 2026

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports HB217, which seeks to permanently establish May as Maryland Native Plant Month to formalize the annual proclamations issued by the Governor since 2023. This recurring designation will increase public awareness of the essential role native plants play in supporting wildlife, sustaining Maryland's ecosystems and economy, and benefiting human communities. Importantly, HB217 will provide growers with the predictability and advance timing they need to grow the plants and presents a valuable promotional opportunity for Maryland's nursery industry—helping local growers capture market share in an expanding plant category—while requiring no state funding or mandates.

Native plants form the backbone of Maryland's ecosystems and are the primary food source for much of our wildlife, including the state's native pollinators. **Maryland's \$3-billion agriculture industry relies heavily on pollination services—many of which are provided not by managed honeybees, but by native bee species which depend on native plants for habitat.** Many common crops grown in Maryland—such as squash, pumpkins, tomatoes, and blueberries—are pollinated most effectively by native bees, a fact that remains largely unknown to the public. Even crops that do not strictly require pollination, including cotton, soybeans, and peppers, show increased yields when visited by bees.^{1,2}

The United States Geological Survey has found that native bees are the primary pollinators for most crops or play a critical role in supplementing the work of European honeybees. Yet despite their importance, once-abundant native pollinators are in steep decline. A large **North American study found that more than half of native bee species are in decline, and nearly one in four is now imperiled and at growing risk of extinction.**³

The drivers of these declines are complex, but habitat loss, including lack of native plants, consistently ranks among the most significant threats.⁴ Between 20 and 45 percent of native bee species require specific native plants.⁵ Another well-known pollinator example is the monarch butterfly, which cannot reproduce without milkweed. Monarch populations, once abundant, are now threatened with extinction.

¹ USGS, "What is the Role of Native Bees in the U.S.?", <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-role-native-bees-united-states>

² Hannah K. Levenson, et al., Evaluating the impact of increased pollinator habitat on bee visitation and yield metrics in soybean crops, *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment*, Volume 331, 2022, ISSN 0167-8809, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2022.107901>.

³ Pollinators in Peril, Center for Biological Diversity, February, 2017. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/native_pollinators/pdfs/Pollinators_in_Peril.pdf

⁴ Maryland Department of Natural Resources, What's the Buzz: All About Pollinators <https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/pages/habitat/wawhatsthebuzz.aspx#:~:text=Help%20Pollinators%20in%20Decline.resources%20for%20creating%20pollinator%20habitat:>

⁵ Ibid

This pattern is repeated across countless species throughout our ecosystems, many of which are keystone species essential to maintaining healthy food webs.

Native pollinators are essential not only for food production but also for maintaining the broader food web that sustains Maryland's wildlife and, ultimately, human communities. Expanding the use of native plants is one of the most effective, accessible actions individuals, landowners, and local governments can take to support pollinator populations and strengthen ecological resilience.

Over centuries, native trees and plants have been removed from our landscapes and replaced with non-native—and sometimes invasive—species. While these plants may be visually appealing, they often provide little to no value for Maryland's wildlife, including our critical pollinators.

Beyond biodiversity benefits, native plants play a vital role in protecting Maryland's waterways. **Deep-rooted native vegetation filters pollutants, stabilizes soil, reduces nutrient runoff, improves stormwater management, and contributes to the health of the Chesapeake Bay.** Improved water quality supports bay grasses, fisheries, Maryland's \$600 million seafood industry, and our \$21 billion tourism industry.⁶

Public interest in native plants is growing, which presents an opportunity to address this ecological problem and boost our local nursery industry. In 2022, one in three American adults reported purchasing plants specifically to benefit wildlife, up from 26 percent in 2020.⁷ Marylanders want to be part of the solution. Establishing a commemorative month to complement Maryland's Native Plant Program is an effective way to continue building public awareness through education and engagement and drive consumers to their local nurseries or to initiate projects with their landscape professional.

An annual, predictable commemorative month will give Maryland nurseries sufficient lead time to grow and promote native plants, encouraging voluntary participation by growers and retailers statewide. HB217 will help educate Marylanders while providing local businesses with a promotional opportunity to continue to grow consumer demand—one that aligns economic opportunity with environmental stewardship.

For these reasons, we respectfully request a favorable report on HB217.

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⁶ Economic Impact of Tourism in Maryland, 2024, [TE Maryland EI 2024](#)

⁷ Fallon, Caitlyn, "Consumer Gardening Report Finds One in Three People Turning to Native Plants, Gardening for Wildlife" *The National Wildlife Federation*, May 2, 2022