



Doreen Abubakar of New Haven presses wildflower seeds into the soil in her milk jug planter during the “Propagating Native Wildflowers from Seed” class at the Yale Peabody Museum on Nov. 1. Photo: Judy Benson

Wildflowers out of milk jugs: a simple way to help pollinators

First came the “doom and gloom.” A bumble bee common just a few decades ago is now extirpated. Invasive species are supplanting the native trees and wildflowers pollinators need. Native habitats are compromised.

“Now let’s think about how we can fix this,” said Jim Sirch about 10 minutes into his presentation to the 25 students. They had gathered for a two-hour course, “Propagating Native Wildflowers from Seed,” in a classroom at the Yale Peabody Museum in New Haven.

So what if Sirch, Peabody’s education coordinator, was preaching to the choir – a choir, that is, of gardeners eager to use their own yards as havens for the wildflowers that native bees, butterflies and birds need to pollinate, lay eggs and find food? His students clearly wanted to help him spread the message

with their actions, aided by his simple instructions, easily obtained materials and offerings from his hand-collected stores of more than a dozen varieties of wildflower seeds.

Sirch demonstrated his method for starting them from seed to mimic the conditions they’ve evolved under. Unlike those from cultivated or non-native varieties, native wildflower seeds should be planted in the fall and kept outside through the winter.

“Wildflower seeds require a cold, moist period,” he explained. “They have this built-in mechanism to keep from sprouting until spring.”

Following his direction, the students each took a translucent plastic milk jug and box cutter and poked drainage holes in the bottom. They sliced their jugs almost completely in half, leaving one section under the handle attached. The bottom halves were

then filled with soil. Then the chosen seeds were pressed into the dirt.

“The rule of thumb is that you plant a seed as deep as it is wide,” Sirch said.

A thin layer of sand was dusted over the seeds to retain moisture. Finally, the top of the jug was replaced and the sliced midsection sealed with duct tape, with the cap left off so moisture can get in.

“This is an inexpensive way to get lots of wildflower plants,” Sirch said. “Plus, it’s a very satisfying thing to do.”

At home, the jugs should be placed outside, facing east, Sirch told them.

“Then we’re to just leave them out there until spring?” one student asked.

“You are,” he said. “Have faith!”

—Judy Benson

What's in our names?

What are wrack lines? The word wrack is a term for various kinds of seaweed, and wrack lines are the collections of organic matter (sea grass, shells, feathers, seaweed and other debris) that are deposited on shore by high tides. More generally, wrack lines are where the sea meets the land.

With our magazine *Wrack Lines*, we tell stories about the intersection of the land, sea and Connecticut Sea Grant. So what is Connecticut Sea Grant? One of 34 Sea Grant programs across the country, it helps residents make the most of our coastal resources and inland waterways.

It addresses the challenges that come with living by the water or within a Long Island Sound watershed, in a state with 332 miles of shoreline and three major tidal rivers. This NOAA-state partnership based at UConn’s Avery Point campus works with aquaculture farmers, fishermen and seafood purveyors to help their businesses prosper.

It funds research essential to understanding and managing our changing coastal and inland environments. It provides communities and local leaders with the information they need to make better land and shoreline decisions that result in more resilient communities and healthier watersheds. It educates students as well as teachers and adults of all ages about the marine environment.

Connected to experts and residents who live, work and recreate in the Sound and its watershed, it brings diverse interests together around a common purpose of working for mutually beneficial solutions to problems.

Small in staff but big in impact, Connecticut Sea Grant is like a pilot boat that navigates the way for large vessels toward safe harbors. Since 1988, Connecticut Sea Grant has supported “Science Serving the Connecticut Coast.”



The wrack line is clearly visible on a small beach near one of the trails at Roosevelt Campobello International Park. Photo: Judy Benson

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Bicyclists enjoy views of Long Island Sound at Saybrook Point in Old Saybrook this fall.
Photo: Judy Benson



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