

ALERT TOPICAL

Why bees will thank you if you don't mow your lawn in the month of May

Adam Rogan

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A monarch butterfly, center, pollinates in Pritchard Park on Sept. 14, 2021.

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The reason Americans idealize a well-manicured, tightly trimmed lawn of green grass is largely “marketing,” according to Nan Calvert, a program manager with the nonprofit **Root Pike Watershed Initiative Network**. There is no actual benefit to it other than subjective appearance.

“Lawn or turf or sod, whatever you want to call it, it represents absolute zero habitat, the way we take care of them,” Calvert said in an interview. “They provide essentially nothing for species that depend on plants. It doesn’t provide them with anything. There’s no pollen. There’s no nectar. There’s no diversity. It’s ridiculously resource-consuming.”

“We spend billions in this country marketing the idea that you have to have the perfect lawn. (But) there is no such thing as a perfect lawn.”

Calvert is among those advocating for what is known as “No Mow May.” By not mowing your lawn until June at the earliest — and thus by allowing native pollinator-friendly plants like dandelions, violets and clovers to grow without being literally nipped in the bud — plant life finds it easier to survive, many insects are more likely to survive more than a few days out of hibernation, thus allowing plants to survive longer by allowing more pollination.



Calvert

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There's a reason so many terms in environmental science revolve around the term “cycle.” Likewise, some human “cycles” cause more damage than good.

“We pour pesticides onto our lawns. And we pour herbicides and fertilizer on there. And we mow them and we mow them,” Calvert said. When lawns are cut excessively, a lot of grass clippings end up in waterways, allowing algae to grow more than it otherwise would, thus worsening the quality of our shared water supply.

Photos: What to plant if you want to attract pollinators



Began in Britain

The No Mow May movement started in the United Kingdom. Appleton became the first American city to officially **endorse the effort in 2020**, with hundreds of homeowners signing on to the voluntary effort.

During No Mow May in Appleton, property owners can still cut their lawn as they please. Typically, the city requires developed lots to have grass grow no more than 8 inches and no more than a foot on undeveloped lots. During May, the city suspends enforcement of that rule.

About 20 other cities have since joined in: including **Neenah, Menasha, Oshkosh and De Pere**. Appleton's effort **received coverage from The New York Times earlier this month**.

The dividends were seen almost immediately, **research** by Lawrence University, located in Appleton, shows.

“As landscapes become increasingly urbanized, biodiversity is threatened by land use modifications, a changing climate, and poor management practices. A notable component of the urban landscape in the United States is a monoculture lawn that is heavily manicured with frequent mowing, and chemically managed,” states the introduction from a 2020 report co-authored by Israel Del Toro, an assistant professor of biology at Lawrence who grew up in Texas; he's the one who brought the idea of No Mow May from the United Kingdom to Appleton after his post-doctorate studies.



Del Toro

That research concluded: “The effect of our No Mow May effort documented increases in both urban bee and floral abundances and diversity. We found that the area that remains not mowed was the strongest predictor of bee abundance and diversity, while floral species richness also contributed to explaining bee species diversity in mowed and unmowed areas in the City of Appleton.”



Two bees settle on flowers on Sept. 14 in Pritchard Park in Racine, performing the indispensable act of pollination.

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Bees found more frequently

Among the findings were that sweat bees — the second-largest family of bees otherwise known as Halictidae, with more than 4,000 distinct species — were found in mowed areas 43 times, compared to 158 in unmowed areas during the course of the 2020 study. There were similar increases for other families of bees, including the largest family, Apidae.

In an interview, Del Toro summarized the findings: “Increased abundances and diversities ... including moss, beetles and flies, which is basically good for the environment,” he said.

“Pollinators are affected by a variety of sources, the biggest one being habitat loss. But also the over-use of chemicals: herbicides, pesticides.”

So why is it No Mow May, instead of No Mow June or July?

“May is really important because that’s when pollinators are coming out of hibernation ... (and feeling) really, really hungry,” Del Toro said.