

Your Trees are Meadows in the Sky

By Elizabeth Craig

When I first moved to Connecticut, I'd look out the window of my house, beyond the big lawn to the woody edge, and think about which trees on that woody edge needed to be removed to improve the look of the property. Top of the list, most offensive to my eye, were the thin, scraggly black cherry trees, many looking particularly dismal since they were plagued with black knot fungus. But as the years went by, I noticed these black cherries were where all the action was in the garden. The birds loved these cherry trees and could often be seen hanging from all angles on them, eating fruits, hunting insects. And for such limp-looking trees they have an amazing number of fragrant white flowers, buzzing with bees, racemes with multiple small flowers, candle shaped about the size of a finger. At some point, I realized these black cherries, while looking ratty, were the most valuable trees I had for wildlife. And great for bird watching. How can scraggly-looking trees like black cherry provide such an abundance? Your trees are [meadows in the sky](#).



Northern Catalpa (*Catalpa speciosa*), a hummingbird favorite with large orchid like flowers, blooming now May-June.



Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*) white flowers, blooming now June to July.

To improve pollinator habitat on your property, you need to go beyond native perennials, you need to protect the native trees and shrubs growing on your site already, and plant more. Pollinator gardens are not just about those beautiful meadow (prairie) plants seen online and in glossy gardening magazines.

Perhaps like many in this area of New England where trees and

shrubs love to grow, you are thinking just the opposite. You have a wooded section of your property and are thinking about thinning out a few trees so you can grow more sun-loving native perennial wildflowers. Makes sense, you'd like to see and enjoy more



American basswood (*Tilia americana*), the “Bee Tree,” blooming soon late June to mid-July

flowers and pollinators at eye level. Please think again...stop! don't chop down your native trees! Native trees and shrubs are the foundation of a good pollinator garden.

What is lost by removing native trees? Just what everyone wants in a pollinator garden, the beautiful butterflies and some crazy looking moths that visit your flowers. Sure, you'll still have some butterflies and moths that grew up on trees in adjoining properties, parks, or open space, but you can have more butterflies if you have your own trees and shrubs.

Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) caterpillars need to eat the leaves of specific native trees and shrubs (their host plants) to become butterflies and moths. A red maple (*Acer rubrum*) for example is one of the top caterpillar factories, supporting some 285 Lepidoptera species. In contrast the Norway maple (*Acer platanoides*), an invasive plant from Europe, supports a small fraction of that number. The Norway maple is a tree to consider removing and replacing with a native canopy tree. Also included for removal would be the popular 'Royal Red' Norway maple with its purple tinted leaves. The native red maple (*A. rubrum*) has green leaves until fall when they turn a fiery red.

Simply put, adding native trees increases your biodiversity, removing native trees causes a loss of biodiversity. Here is a fabulous photo gallery of [CT](#) and [NY](#) insects that depend on our native trees and on you!

Native Trees to Protect and Plant & the Number of Butterfly and Moth Species They Support

Oaks, 517
Native willows, 456
Native black cherry, 448
Birch, 433
Poplar, 368
Crabapple, 311
Blueberry, Cranberry, 288
Red Maple, 285
Elm, 213
Hickory, 200
Alder, 156



Horse-chestnut or Red Buckeye (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) also a hummingbird favorite, red or white blooms from mid-May to early June.

To expand pollinator habitat, look to your lawn. Create a butterfly island in the middle or corner of your lawn. Don't worry if your site is shaded for part of the day. For the great majority of pollinator perennials, part sun is fine. Aim for a succession of bloom with your favorite native perennials and expand your pollinator gardens with a reduction in lawn every year. [Here is a succession of bloom chart](#) with goldenrod, a must have fall blooming plant.

Spots to Add Native Perennials (Without Cutting Down Trees)

Claw back your lawn where it grows to the woody edge and add wildflowers there. The sunny edge is prime real estate for plants. Add beautiful native perennials to any section of lawn not in use. Better yet, also add native shrubs and understory trees--or canopy trees that act like understory trees while young--and include native perennials in the mix. Utilize sunny areas along your driveway and near entrances, and consider using natives in your container gardens and then re-planting them in your regular garden in fall. Everyone has at least a few invasive plants, find your new pollinator habitat where invasives are currently growing. This can be challenging, it takes time and persistence to contain invasives, but the process can be very rewarding.

[Here is a great booklet of common invasives and their native replacements.](#)

Interested in More?

This [Q&A with Doug Tallamy](#) is full of great ideas. Garden in 3D, says Tallamy, co-author of *The Living Landscape*, and in fact, maybe think 4-D, since by designing your landscape in all three dimensions, layering plants into complex communities, you'll add the "D" of diversity, too...

Elizabeth Craig is a co-founder of the Pollinator Pathway northeast region and serves on its Steering Committee. She also serves as chair of the Wilton, CT Inland Wetlands Commission, is a member of the Wilton Garden Club Conservation Committee, is a master gardener and an arborist.