

## **Bee-Friendly Community Garden Buzzing For More Than 20 Years!**

By Connie Crancer - Pollinator Partnership's NRCS Liaison & Project Wingspan State Coordinator in Michigan

### **From Few to Many**

What started with a handful of gardeners and a few garden plots at Scholl Farms in Montague, Michigan, has blossomed into a community garden with more than three dozen gardeners covering greater than 20,000 square feet. Why does Stu Scholl offer this opportunity of a community garden on his farm? "It's the right thing to do," he says.



Many of his gardeners have shaded yards, sandy soil and visiting deer, and therefore don't have the ideal growing conditions for a vegetable garden. Stu provides plots with loam soils rich in organic material and enriched with composted cow and chicken manure. Plus, the community garden is situated in an open field with plenty of sunshine and surrounded by a deer-discouraging electric fence!

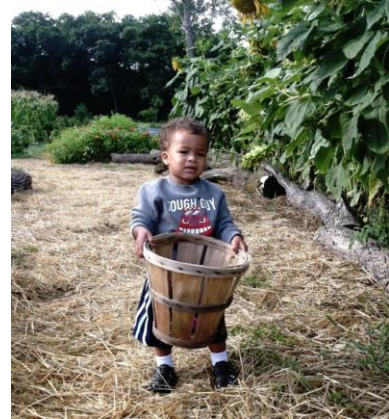
### **The Gardener Connection to Nature**

While those ideal conditions for vegetable gardening first draw growers to Scholl Farms, they soon find so much more. The gardeners have described the farm as their Zen place; a peaceful connection to nature; a relationship and appreciation of the changing seasons; a

community of new-found friends to share stories, growing tips and camaraderie; and vegetables that taste great, grow big, and are free of toxins.

Many say they get excited to see bees, butterflies and birds.

However, when I asked the gardeners if they were aware of the serious decline of pollinators and other beneficial insects, there was hesitation. Natalie, who started gardening with her mother to have an opportunity to share their love of growing things, says she is aware to some degree but isn't



sure how critical it is. Jon, a life-long gardener, says he is "... not tuned in to that."



Even though they enjoy observing the bees and butterflies flitting about in their gardens, most don't grasp that these insects support their gardens by pollinating plants, nor are they aware of the insects that provide natural pest control. And while they may appreciate Stu's conservation-minded farming practices, there is a disconnect in their understanding of the critical role that bees

and insects play and the peril they face worldwide. I want to bring this message to the gardeners so it becomes fundamental to their experience.

### **How To Connect Gardeners To The Bigger Picture**

I have the opportunity to share with the gardeners the importance of bee-friendly gardening practices, for pollination and natural pest control as well as for a greater good

to help mitigate the rapid and serious decline of our pollinators and other insects. I want them to embrace this in their community garden plots and take these practices to their back yards, city gardens, places of worship and schoolyards. An efficient means to get the word out is to place a Bee Friendly Garden sign prominently at the garden to stimulate the gardeners to ask, learn and share how bee-friendly gardening practices benefit our gardens and also fit into a larger landscape of conservation for imperiled native insects. To get the sign I need to apply for [Bee Friendly Gardening](#) (BFG) status.

### **Does This Community Garden Meet BFG Criteria? – Yes!**

If you examine Stu's community garden you will indeed find that it is friendly to bees as well as other beneficial insects. All gardeners are asked to plant the boundaries of their plots with flowering annuals. Sunflowers and zinnias are popular. This helps gardeners delineate their plots, and Stu says, "It helps beautify the garden as well as draw in bees."

There are birdbaths with fresh water within the gardens, and a constructed, naturalized irrigation pond is close by. Although the location of the community garden rotates every couple of years, it is always situated in an oasis of various pollinator habitat plantings and cover crops left to bloom so they provide nectar and pollen. The site is also protected from pesticides.

The gardens are adjacent to hedgerows made up of a variety of shrubs and small trees, windbreaks and native wildflower strips. The woody plantings offer native bees nesting sites by way of leaf and brush litter, un-pruned dead wood and purposefully discarded

hay bales. The wildflower strips offer season-long diverse sources of nectar and pollen, which supports the health of pollinators by providing a variety of phytonutrients. With a buffer of at least ¼ mile to the nearest conventional farming operation and windbreaks and shrub-rows, the community garden is protected from pesticide drift. And, there are strict rules on pesticide use within the community garden. Gardeners need to check with Stu about any product they want to use because the pesticides must be organic and never applied to plants in flower. Gardeners are also encouraged to monitor and identify insects and to accept some pest presence and damage.

Stu says there usually isn't much of an insect problem in the community garden or with his crops. Diversity is the key. Diverse plants in the garden plots, diverse crops in rotation on the farm, and diverse pollinator-friendly habitat throughout encourages diverse species of beneficial insects. And if there is a pest problem, Stu usually takes care of it himself. For example, he sprays Colorado potato beetles with a properly-timed organic product when they occasionally appear in both his potatoes and those in the garden plots.

### **Scholl Farms Community Gardens - Soon to be BFG Registered!**

I am applying for BFG status for the community garden at Scholl Farms so I can place the BFG sign in the garden area to share the important message of bee-friendly farming to the gardeners, their families and the community. Visit the website [SchollFarms.com](http://SchollFarms.com) and watch for the new BFG sign, or stop by the farm and take a look. Scholl Farms is an open-gate farm and Stu happily welcomes visitors!