



Planting for pollinators: shedding light on the importance of shade – Part 2

By Laura Jach Smith, Wisconsin NRCS Pollinator Liaison, Pollinator Partnership



Wild geraniums and native sedges growing under a pagoda dogwood in a Wisconsin residence's pollinator garden. Photo credit: Laura Jach Smith

Trees and shrubs provide important food and shelter for pollinators, so don't be afraid to cast shade upon your yard! Establishing native trees or shrubs can provide a nectar and pollen resource central to local wildlife, simply because many woody species bloom in spring or early summer before most of the prairie forbs. Many native woody species also are host plants, meaning they are the primary food source for the larval (caterpillar) stages of butterflies and moths. Native willow, oak, maple, dogwood, black-, pin- and chokecherry, serviceberry, elderberry, wild plum, nannyberry, and sumac all provide high-quality food for our pollinators, and are a source of food for caterpillars. These caterpillars are also the primary food for many species of local and migratory songbirds, making many of our native trees and shrubs keystone species, or species that build and support large food webs in our ecosystems.

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On a practical note, tree and shrub plantings can also be great windbreaks and privacy screens for homeowners. Creating screens along edges of your yard or property can be especially effective if you add diversity in height and form. For example, put taller trees toward the back (oak, basswoods, maples, aspen), shrubs in the middle (nannyberry, service berry, wild plum) and smaller shrubs in front (native bush honeysuckle, thimbleberry, native roses, native gooseberry, currants). Native shrubs that can multiply on their own through clonal root expansion are especially ideal for property edges, fences, or privacy screens. Not only do they serve as great wildlife cover and a pollinator resource, but they also help resist invasive succession and are more likely to shade out woody invasive species seedlings, due to their dense ticketing nature.

Many of our pollinators need materials for nesting and overwintering. Shrubs with pithy stems (such as raspberries and elderberries) are habitat for stem-nesting bees. Dead branches and twigs are used by cavity-nesting bees and stem-boring moths. Tree snags, downed wood, decomposing logs, and hollows are used by cavity-nesting bees and a plethora of other beneficial insects, amphibians, and small mammals. Leaf litter and brush are also important food and shelter resources for many overwintering pollinators and should be left in place or raked to the shady areas under trees. Many species of lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) rely on fallen leaves for the creation and protection of their cocoons, chrysalis and even egg-laying. It shouldn't be surprising that grass lawns, areas with weed barriers and non-native plants make life difficult for wildlife. Instead, create more undisturbed natural areas surrounding trees, such as herbaceous and woody plantings, which create more wildlife abundance, and allow for more life cycles of moths and butterflies to be completed.

There are technical and financial assistance programs to help you with tree and shrub plantings, windbreaks, wildlife habitat plantings, and savannah and woodland restoration. Connect with an NRCS Pollinator Liaison in your state (<https://www.pollinator.org/nrcs-liaisons>), or find your local NRCS field office (<https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>) to learn more about these cost-share and technical assistance programs.



A nannyberry hedgerow in bloom provides nectar for many native bees, is a larval host to many species of butterflies and moths and provides a great privacy screen. Photo credit: Laura Jach Smith



Spring Azure butterfly, who's larvae feed on native shrubs, like nannyberry and dogwood. Photo credit: Kate Redmond, "Buglady," <https://uwm.edu/field-station/category/bug-of-the-week/>

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