

# Creating a Student-Driven, Pollinator-Friendly Landscape on Campus

Marina McCoy, Thaden School Grounds Manager

Thaden School is an independent school in Bentonville, Arkansas, whose mission is to provide a balanced and challenging education that ignites in its students a passion for discovery and learning, prepares them to succeed in college, and inspires them to lead lives of integrity, purpose, and responsible global citizenship. The school landscape features prairie and wetland habitats, with more than 100 species of native plants. In spring 2022, we engaged students in creating a new pollinator garden in an underused space bordering our vegetable garden and greenhouse.

Middle school students led the design and installation of the garden during a special two-week course. They learned about a diverse range of pollinators - including social and solitary bees, butterflies, moths, hummingbirds, and beneficial insects. We also explored plant and pollinator relationships to understand how different flower shapes and colors attract pollinators and how host plants support the life cycle of insects.

To prepare the area, we tilled the existing vegetation into the ground, taking care to leave patches of aster and goldenrod, and applied a heavy layer of mulch. Our goal was to pack the area with as many plants as possible - both to increase diversity and reduce the space available to competing weeds. We started herbs and annual flowers in the school greenhouse, ordered plug trays of fast-growing native species by mail, and sourced gallon-size perennials from local nurseries. Mulch, plants, seeds, and supplies were purchased with support from a Conservation Education Grant from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

In total, our garden palette included 35 different plants, with both host plants and pollen and nectar resources for a range of pollinators. Students used base maps and tracing paper to brainstorm ideas for the garden layout. Their final design incorporated features that attract both pollinators and people, including large patches of color and blooms throughout the season. They placed an arbor and bench where visitors could sit and observe the garden and were careful to locate flowers that attract wasps and other beneficial insects farther from the path.

After planting, we watered the garden through a scorching first summer and enlisted faculty and parent volunteers to help with weeding. Going into its third season, the garden is a thriving outdoor learning space. Students have used the garden as the home base for a pollinator-themed summer camp, and for hands-on projects like collecting native plant seeds for a campus seed library. Recently, our high school plant sciences class completed applications to certify the space as a monarch waystation and wildlife habitat, and we are a Pollinator Partnership registered Bee Friendly Garden.



Caption: Middle school students present their pollinator posters in front of the garden.