

# Winnebago County Success from the Field: A passion for bringing nature back.

## Background

Leslie Meyer has heard from several neighbors over the past few years, “Thank you for planting this.” They are referring to the fourteen acres of pollinator habitat that Leslie maintains on Hideaway Farm in Pickett, WI within Winnebago County. Seeded in spring of 2020, Leslie’s native conservation cover planting is now rich with many species of native wildflowers in full bloom, attracting pollinators and other wildlife. Leslie didn’t have any background in conservation, but first became interested in pollinators and their habitat after listening to a talk show on Wisconsin Public Radio. This inspired her to attend a Pollinator Field Day, where she met other farmers who had shared their success and encouraged her to plant native habitat for pollinators. Leslie also talked with other knowledgeable and supportive people in the area, like Merrie Schamberger. Merrie is a Resource Conservationist in the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) from the Oshkosh Service Center, who was able to provide even more information about the process and the benefits of creating habitat for pollinators. Leslie was grateful for the thirty years of hay, corn, and alfalfa rotations that was farmed on her land previously, but she was eager to put the land, “more in balance with nature.” Leslie recalls thinking, “Let’s rest it. Put it back to nature.”

## Highlights

Leslie received financial and technical assistance after applying to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) through the NRCS Oshkosh Field Office. Merrie, and the service center staff, helped to create a plan for Leslie’s land. There were fourteen acres that Leslie wanted to put into pollinator habitat – six of those acres already had some existing resources and plants suitable for pollinators, so Merrie decided management alone would be best for maintaining those acres. The other eight acres of hayfield was to be prepped and seeded with a native conservation cover, using a seed mix designed specifically with pollinators in mind. Merrie selected wildflowers with successive bloom times, so there would always be something flowering from early summer through late fall. This would ensure native pollinators would have access to food resources all season long, which is an important component of supporting healthy pollinator populations. It also makes for a beautiful prairie that Leslie, and passers-by, would get to appreciate all season long. Leslie recalls how Merrie helped her find reputable contractors and seed sources and was supportive throughout the entire process. Merrie continues to be a source of information and feedback as she returns for field visits to evaluate how things are looking, and to recommend any needed next steps in management.

## Future Plans

Leslie is planning to continue maintaining her fourteen acres of pollinator habitat well into the future. When asked why conservation is important to her, Leslie said, “So many people are abusing what they have been given. Bring back the balance of nature and give something back.” She encourages people who are interested in doing something on their own land to give it a go. “You don’t need a lot of space. Just do it, even if it’s just your backyard.” Leslie hopes that her habitat is an inspiration to others and people will consider it for their land, too. She has noticed a change over the years in farmers taking a lot more initiative to take care of the land, “[they are] farming smarter, more economically, and taking great pride in what they do.” Leslie hopes that will translate into more farmers and landowners doing what she did.

Merrie really enjoyed working with Leslie on her plan and recalls that Leslie was very easy to work with. Merrie continues to check in to see how things are going and helps monitor the habitat for management needs. There are some areas where non-native grasses are beginning to get a foothold, so future management will include creating a plan for prescribed burns to set back the non-native grass encroachment and encourage the native plant species in those areas.

For others who are thinking of creating some pollinator habitat on their land, Merrie encourages people to, “talk to other people who have done this before - establishing pollinator habitat takes time.” Setting expectations is important, as a seeded project often shows best by the third year. It takes some time for the native plants to establish well before they reach maturity and flower, but it is worth the wait – just check with Leslie, her neighbors, or the new flutter of pollinators that found home on Leslie’s land.