October 14, 2023

Friends of Princeton Open Space (FOPOS) received $3,000 from the 2022 Holden Grant funding round to expand a pollinator garden located at the entrance to the Billy Johnson Mountain Lakes Nature Preserve. The pollinator garden includes a diversity of native plants that support the health of insect and bird populations, and provides a showpiece for educational programs.

Work in the pollinator garden began this year during FOPOS's annual 'Love Your Park Day,' led by Anna Corichi, Director of Natural Resources and Stewardship. On February 11th an enthusiastic group of volunteers worked in the project area to remove invasive vines and shrubs, successfully expanding the site to make way for spring planting events. In May, another stewardship session was held to target the removal of invasive dame's rocket, an attractive flowering plant that had blanketed portions of the site. This session sparked conversation with park visitors who had passed by and inquired about the work. Dame's rocket along with other invasive species were highlighted in FOPOS's 'Plant this, Not that' series shared on social media platforms and with our email listserv as an educational resource.

Thanks to Holden Grant funds, 250+ native plants were purchased this spring to enhance the pollinator garden. On Arbor Day, 7th and 8th grade students from Montgomery's Upper Middle School helped to plant large ball and burlap trees in the project area which include Flowering dogwood, Eastern redbud, and Black gum trees. Hazelnut, winterberry, viburnum, and dogwood shrubs were added to the understory to fill in gaps where invasive shrubs had been removed, and to add diversity to the otherwise spicebush-dominant shrub layer. Additionally, hundreds of wildflowers and ferns were planted to help establish a native ground cover and to increase habitat value and beauty. Blue bells, sensitive fern, and cardinal flower were planted in the wet wooded areas that line the driveway entrance to the Preserve, while wild columbine, geranium, and Jacob's ladder populate sunny borders.

The pollinator garden was cared for and monitored throughout the spring and summer months by FOPOS's stewardship team, which included 3 paid college-aged interns and 2 paid high school student interns operating under Anna's supervision. In addition to planting, volunteers and interns helped to water, weed, cage, and remove encroaching vines to ensure the project's success. This year alone, FOPOS has hosted some 36 weekend volunteer sessions open to the public, in addition to many weekday sessions with various school and corporate groups. Educational nature walks were offered to the public as well, including several morning bird walks led by local expert and FOPOS board member Winnie Spar, and our first ever evening screech owl walk led by South Jersey Wildlife Tours. FOPOS Land Steward Interns led a variety of events as well, including 2 herpetofauna walks, an art walk, and a guided lake loop nature walk showcasing a family of wood ducks, green herons, an osprey, basking turtles, and more.

A major highlight and proof of concept that occurred this spring was an educational 'Native Plant, How-To' session sponsored by local STAR Neighborhood groups. Anna served as the guest speaker for the talk and used the pollinator garden as a demonstration site to highlight the benefit of native plants, as well as offering strategic tips on managing invasive species. The event was a success and is one that could be repeated and expanded upon in the future.

Of the $3,000 awarded in Holden Grant funds, $2,206 was used to purchase native plants and $500 was applied towards protective caging materials. The remaining $294 will be used for the purchase of native trees and shrubs this fall. A follow-up report will be sent upon the completion of the planting. FOPOS is grateful to the Washington Crossing Audubon for their support of this project.