

Environment

Penns Valley students explore environment

by David Hutto

It is an act of inspiration to turn butterflies into educational tools. Teaching children in central Pennsylvania that what they do affects the Chesapeake Bay may be difficult, but teaching them to know and love the outdoors can help achieve that goal. That is the work of Kathleen Galligan and the Penns Valley Conservation Association (PVCA).

“The idea is to give the kids some enriching outdoor experience with the watershed if possible,” Galligan says. She works with the Penns Valley Area schools, out of an office at the high school.

“The environment sort of sells itself,” she adds. Her work with children in the district seems to bear that out. When she began her job in October, she was introduced as someone who would be teaching environmental topics, and the children greeted her with cheers.

Galligan’s work in the schools is funded by a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. The grant was awarded to PVCA specifically for the purpose of bringing environmental awareness to the schools. The grant money covers Galligan’s salary, along with supplies and buses for field trips. Although the grant will

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--Kathleen Galligan,
Penns Valley Conservation Association

end in October, the work with the children is intended to continue, through work that Galligan is doing with teacher education.

“The main focus is K-8,” Galligan says. In addition to curriculum additions throughout the year, PVCA has focused on three major approaches for bringing environmental awareness to Penns Valley students. One of these is to create a dedicated area at each elementary school for environmental study, or “outdoor environmental learning centers.”

Two of the outdoor learning centers are already in place. At Penns Valley Elementary, the center is located on a hill near the school and includes a path running through a wooded area. Centre Hall Elementary has an area with benches and plantings. At the third school, Miles Township Elementary, the outdoor area is still being planned but will include butterfly-attracting plants.

The second approach to environmental

education, Environmental Days, is particularly popular with students. These special green days run from May 7 till June 7 this year. Each grade at the three elementary schools has a day when the students take a break from other subjects to focus only on environmental issues.

As examples of these activities, one class visited a local creek to learn about macroinvertebrates, while another visited a wetland area to learn about watersheds, wetland plants and animals and restoration. On May 10, kindergarteners from Miles Township walked in the field on the farm of Bennual Lapp, to see onions and asparagus come up from the ground, learning where their food comes from.

The third approach of PVCA is to keep this work going in Penns Valley schools. Part of Galligan’s responsibility is to help design curriculum that teachers can use to help the program continue.

“The environmental centers were all



Photo by David Hutto
Sarah Martin of Miles Township Elementary, holding a rhubarb leaf at a farm in Rebersburg.

made with the teachers’ input on what they need,” Galligan said. Because teachers must follow state mandates, the environmental curriculum has to meet those needs. Galligan said of the activities she comes up

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Think before you dig, buy native plants instead

by Elizabeth Goreham & Sally McMurry

In our early columns, we discussed why to use native plants in your backyard garden; which native trees are especially valuable; and strategies for getting the most biodiversity “bang for the buck” in the herbaceous perennial bed. Now it’s spring and thoughts turn to planting. In the conventional garden mode, finding plants is easy: from garden centers, local nonprofits, and friends, gardeners can easily obtain seeds and plants from a standard popular repertoire. But what if you want to obtain native plants? Where can an aspiring native-plant gardener turn? This column will discuss several issues relevant to backyard gardeners who may want to acquire native plants.

Because native-plant gardening is just gaining popularity, and because native plants do grow in the wild, several special considerations pertain.

First, and above all, native-plant authorities advise gardeners never to simply dig up a native plant from its habitat—even if it’s on your own property. Even assuming that you seek and obtain permission from the property owner where the plant is located, harvesting from the wild violates basic principles. It threatens the very ecosystems we are trying to preserve. It may not seem like much to take just a single plant, but of course if everyone did that, plant populations could quickly decline. In fact, the New England Wild Flower Society was founded back in 1900 precisely because of overen-



thusiastic harvesting by individually well meaning, but collectively devastating, nature lovers. The practicalities alone are reason enough to demur from digging: mature natives dug up and transplanted will usually fare poorly. And, there may be legal

issues involved. Chris Firestone, Wild Plant Program manager for the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, explains that under Pennsylvania law (specifically the Wild Resource Conservation Act of 1982), anyone other than the property owner (or a state employee with an official reason) wishing to collect plants listed as Pennsylvania Endangered or Pennsylvania Threatened must secure a Wild Plant Management Permit. The up-to-date list of Pennsylvania Endangered and Pennsylvania Threatened plants is quite long. It can be found at www.naturalheritage.state.pa.us/PlantsPage.aspx

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Maya Althouse educates the public on bees

by Jill Gómez

Bees need a spokesperson these days, and Maya Althouse is up to the task. Well before she became the 2009 Honey Queen of the Pennsylvania State Beekeepers Association (PSBA), she studied the plight of diminishing honey bees and their critical importance to life on this planet.

Althouse moved with her family to the Rebersburg area from Florida in the summer of 2007, before her sophomore year at Penns Valley Area High School.

“Growing up in Miami, honey was something you found in the store on a shelf,” said Althouse. She met beekeeper Mike Byers at the Millheim farmers’ market that summer, and their conversation led to her interest in bees. Students in the Penns Valley school system are required to select a major project and have until their senior year to complete it. Althouse chose bees, and in the fall of 2007 she acquired her first set of honey bees, an “observation hive,” smaller than a standard hive.

“I wanted to be hands-on, to connect with bees, so to speak,” she said. Just a year later she ran for and received the title of Honey Queen, and around that time set up a larger hive in her backyard. As part of her yearlong, reign Althouse gave over 40 presentations at a myriad of events and organizations all around Pennsylvania. Locally, she appeared at the Grange Fair, the Ag Progress Days at Penn State and the Centre County Ag Forum. She also talked to civic groups, the Rotary Club and a wide age range of students in several school districts.

“Kids are very interested in learning about bees,” said Althouse. “They were curious and wanted to know more.”

Althouse wows audiences with her bee knowledge. Adults get just as much out of her presentations as kids.

“I’d be in a room full of educated professionals, and they’d have a very limited knowledge of hives and crops in general,” she said. Though her reign as queen ended in January, PSBA invited Althouse to continue giving presentations. She’s held six since the beginning of 2010.

All of her experience in front of groups has given Althouse a poise and calm rare in someone so young. For each presentation, she props up a professional-looking three-paneled display she crafted and hands around 8 ½ x 11 photos: bright yellow pollen on the legs of worker bees; a queen receiving royal jelly from her “bees in waiting” and workers doing dances to inform their colleagues of flower locations. Her participants get to manipulate the smoking apparatus—used to quiet bees and enable a keeper to take off the cover of the hive without freaking out the bees—and handle the hooded bee jacket she wears when she opens her hive. She talks of wintering bees, who gather in a cluster to keep warm, “much like emperor penguins in the movie ‘March of the Penguins,’” she said. In the spring, when Althouse pulls the trays from her hive, she can see the path this clustered bee unit took as it moved through its snowed-in dwelling, feasting honey from the previous season.

Althouse speaks to every group about the

problems honey bees have faced in recent years, with inexplicable deaths of whole hives believed to be caused by pesticide use in crops. Another of the photos shows two side-by-side breakfast plates: one with all the usual trimmings for a typical big American breakfast, and the other showing what foods would be left if there were no more bees to pollinate the foods we’re used to eating. Not many.

She has a passion for informing the public about bees and encourages everyone to consider setting up a hive on their property if they can. Farmers certainly benefit, since bees are critical in ensuring pollination and therefore successful crops. Ordinary house owners can also make a big difference.

“People are more aware of what’s going on [with hive loss], and seem to have a



Photo by Jill Gómez
Maya Althouse, recently-retired Bee Queen, remains active promoting beekeeping in the Rebersburg area.

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CLOSED MONDAYS

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Some native plant advocates rescue plants on land destined for development; others collect seeds. Each of these strategies is valuable, but neither is normally pursued by amateur backyard gardeners. In the end, most native-plant gardeners will buy plants at commercial nurseries and greenhouses. As a native-plant buyer, the gardener has several things to think about. Ideally, one should purchase from a supplier who sells only plants that are grown from sustainably collected seed, or propagated using standard and appropriate techniques. Reputable suppliers will be able to present evidence of sound practices. The watchword is "nursery propagated." Seedling stock is often recommended over clonal stock, cultivars or horticulturally-enhanced plants. The last three are less genetically diverse than seedling stock, and this genetic diversity is important to the whole enterprise of native-plant gar-

dening.

Beware of companies advertising large quantities at low prices. There's a good chance that the reason the price is so low is that it cost them nothing to acquire these plants (i.e. they just dug them up someplace). Bare-root plants in assorted containers are another clue that plants may not have been systematically raised on-site.

Another important consideration is the "ecotype." Plants of the very same species may have varied adaptations depending on the soil, rainfall, slope, elevation or frost date where they live. If an ecotype is moved to a new situation, it may not possess the same vigor, nor interact in the same way with other species. If possible, find out where the nursery owner obtained it.

All that said, since the native plant movement is just beginning to reach a wider public, it's not always possible to fill all these exacting requirements in a single shopping trip. It's still pretty exciting just to find

native plants for sale, and so it's well to patronize the limited number of native plant suppliers. The specialized native plant business is gradually developing. Conservation organizations sometimes sponsor seasonal sales. Conventional nurseries have always carried some native plants and probably will be likely to offer more in the near future. And even mainstream national retailers are beginning to tune into public interest in native plants. Labeling at outlets like Lowe's sometimes touts native plants. Beware though, if you buy from a national retailer, make sure you're buying a plant native to your region. And keep on asking retailers to stock native plants; as demand grows, so will supply.

We also contacted nurseries in our own area to find out what they offer in the native-plant realm. The following is a partial list of local outlets that indicates some of the possibilities for finding native plants

for purchase in the area.

Fox Hill Gardens (237-9087)
1035 Fox Hill Road, State College

Mountain Greenery Perennials (353-8020)
1976 Purdue Mountain Rd, Bellefonte

The Rock Garden (466-2100)
176 Brush Valley Road, Boalsburg

Tait Farm Harvest Shop and Greenhouse
(466-3411)
Rte 332, Boalsburg

Patchwork Farm and Greenhouse
(422-9030)
Aronsburg, PA

Blackhawk Homestead Nursery (364-9668)
389 Blackhawk Road, Centre Hall

Doyle Farm Nursery (717-862-3134)
Delta, PA

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with, "the most challenging part is making sure it fits with the curriculum [required by the state], that you don't do it once and it will never happen again."

Teachers are also involved in keeping this program sustainable by attending workshops. One such opportunity allowed them to learn how to plan and create a wetland at their school. A goal of the workshop was to learn how to involve students in the planning and building of wetlands.

The partnership between PVCA and Penns Valley Area schools began in 2006 when the first grant was applied for. With that money, PVCA began helping with the

planning of Environmental Days, something the schools were already doing.

The PVCA is a nonprofit organization, and the people who do this work are all volunteers, aside from Galligan's grant-funded position. In addition to the work in the schools, PVCA also does stream clean-ups and they run the Crickfest music festival as a fund raiser.

Beginning with kindergarteners visiting Amish farms to see the genesis of food to sixth-graders building windmills as they learn about renewable energy sources, students in Penns Valley schools are learning the importance of environmental stewardship. It seems that watching butterflies does make a difference for fostering a love of the natural world.



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Mockingbird offers a large repertoire of song

by Alice L. Fuller

It had a remarkable repertoire. One bird song after another poured from its talented vocal cords. While I have heard mockingbirds sing many times, it was the first time I could recall of having the good fortune to hear an individual launch into the full powers which give the bird its name.

It was early evening when Ted and I drove to the cemetery in Pine Grove Mills to plant some geraniums. Some bird notes caught my attention and I thought at first that it might be a chat singing. It was possible because they came from shrubbery dividing the manicured lawn from a neighboring field of corn. In a moment I realized my mistake; the singer was a mockingbird.

After a few minutes the bird flew and appeared on a branch of a maple tree near us and imitation after imitation flowed from his talented throat. Apparently he liked the sounds of a blue jay, for the calls of the jay frequently were interjected into the mocker's evening soliloquy. One after another I recognized the chatter of a white-breasted nuthatch, the "wheep" of a great crested flycatcher, both the scolding notes and the song of a robin, the fluted notes of a wood thrush, the bright ones of an oriole, a towhee's song and still more that I cannot recall now, plus bits of the mockingbird's own song. Dorothy Bordner's drawing depicts a mockingbird singing his diverse repertoire.

This is one bird species which certainly has been appropriately named, not only its common name but also its scientific name.

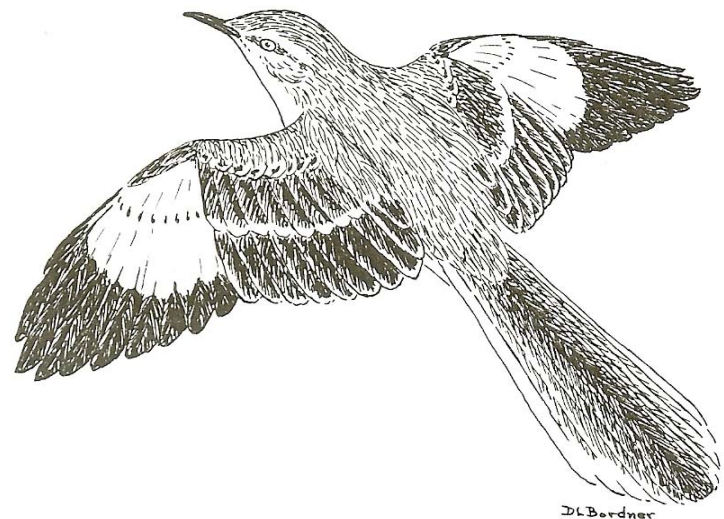


The latter is *Mimus polyglottos* which means "many-tongued mimic."

The mockingbird was first described by Mark Catesby some 200 years ago from birds he discovered in the Carolinas. He called it "The Mock-bird of the Carolinas." We still think of the mockingbird as a southern species, yet the bird has extended its range north until it has reached most of the northeastern states and can be found across much of the country to the Pacific except for the northern prairie and mountain states.

In his life history account of the mockingbird probably written at least 40 or more years ago, the late A. C. Bent observed: "Can anyone visualize the gray-clad aristocrat amid snow and ice, amid spruces and hemlocks or upon cliffs battered by the might of the North Atlantic? Can one visualize it, indeed, without mental pictures of moss-bannered oaks or towering magnolias, where the yellow jessamine climbs aloft to burst in golden glory among pines and cypresses and the immaculate disks of Cherokee roses reflect the moonlight?"

Yes, Mr. Bent, we cannot only visualize but frequently observe the mockingbird on a snow-laden branch or snow-covered evergreen in the midst of January in Pennsylvania. The setting may not be quite



as romantic or picturesque, but mockers are now widespread over most of our state with the exception of the forested and mountainous parts. This is a bird of yard, garden and farmland and since it is not a migrating species it remains to endure the freezing temperatures and snows of its extended territory.

Its music alone makes this interesting bird a welcome addition to our local fauna. Other birds are mimics such as our native catbird and imported starling, but none have the remarkable talents of the mockingbird. This species has a beautiful song of its own and I cannot help but wonder how and why the mockingbird acquired such amazing powers of imitation. One observer reported that he heard a mockingbird change his tune

87 times in seven minutes and that he was able to recognize 58 of the imitations given. When one watches a mockingbird in action one cannot help but believe that the bird sings his repertoires for his own pleasure and amusement. Perhaps some folks awakened at dawn or the middle of the night by an individual mocker giving endless monotonous repetitions of a few phrases might wish that individual and all its kin could be returned to their southern origins. I can only advise these folks to be patient and to wish that sometime they, too, will be privileged to hear the inimitable performance that I heard on a lovely spring evening. I concur with the individual who labeled the mockingbird as "Mimus the Matchless."

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greater respect for bees now," she said. "Plants definitely appreciate having bees around, to have more pollinators."

Althouse helps folks get started with their own hives: ordering the bees, purchasing materials and setting up the hive. She checks back a couple of weeks later after the bees have had a chance to establish themselves in their new environment, and walks the new beekeeper through the first cover-removal process.

In January, Althouse ran for American Honey Queen of the American Beekeeping

Federation and was first runner up. The five other state honey queen contestants voted her Miss Congeniality, and anyone who knows her would not be surprised at this. She's modest to the degree that she didn't mention this honor in the interview.

Althouse plans to attend the University of Delaware this fall and will enroll in the entomology (study of insects) program.

"I'd like to learn more about insects in general...and find some way of educating the masses," Althouse said. "I want to stay in the public education end of the entomology spectrum."

No doubt she'll continue to have a positive impact on her bee friends.



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