

Neighborhood habitat takes root



Sherburne SWCD leverages Lawns to Legumes funding to create residential pollinator habitat near Big Eagle Lake



Gardeners who live near Big Eagle Lake in Sherburne County are working to create pollinator habitat to benefit at-risk species, with a focus on the rare Uncas skipper butterfly, whose known Minnesota population is found solely in nearby Uncas Dunes Scientific and Natural Area (SNA).

The effort is made possible by a \$29,760 Lawns to Legumes demonstration neighborhood grant awarded to Sherburne

SWCD in January 2020 by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). The grant is one of 12 demonstration neighborhood grants BWSR distributed to local governments and nonprofit organizations in 2020.

Demonstration neighborhoods are community projects intended to enhance pollinator habitat in key corridors and raise awareness about protecting

Top: Before-and-after photos depict a pollinator pocket planting installed as part of a Sherburne SWCD demonstration neighborhood program.

Bottom: A 4,000-square-foot Sherburne County pollinator meadow was completed in 2020.

Contributed Photos

pollinators in residential settings. The grants are one component of BWSR’s Lawns to Legumes pilot program, which offers workshops, coaching, technical assistance and cost-share funding to

install pollinator-friendly native plants in Minnesota yards. Program funding comes from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund.

Big Eagle Lake is a high priority area for pollinator habitat restoration because it's near Sand Dunes State Forest, Uncas Dunes SNA and the Saint Francis River corridor, which support rare pollinators. In addition to the Uncas skipper, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) positively identified the federally endangered rusty patched bumblebee (Minnesota's state bee) in the area in 2017.

"We know (those species) are relatively nearby, so we thought this would be a great place to start expanding habitat in areas that don't have the floral resources these species require," said Franny Gerde. A Sherburne SWCD urban conservationist, she coordinates the Big Eagle Lake Community Demonstration Neighborhood project.

Organizations that oversee demonstration neighborhoods work with residents to install four types of planting practices designed to benefit pollinators: native pocket plantings, beneficial trees and shrubs, pollinator lawns and pollinator meadows. Through the Sherburne SWCD demonstration neighborhood program, residents can apply for financial reimbursement based on project type: \$250 is available for beneficial trees and shrubs, \$500 for



A landscaping contractor applies a layer of straw to protect this recently seeded Sherburne County pollinator meadow from erosion.

pocket plantings, \$500 for pollinator lawns and \$2,000 for pollinator meadows.

"We've had interest in almost all the planting categories," Gerde said. "People are starting to see the benefits of less lawn and more flowering plants."

Over the past year, Gerde has conducted seven site visits at seven residences in Sherburne County yielding one completed project: a 4,000-square-foot pollinator meadow using a combination of seed, plugs (small starter plants) and shrubs. Another project incorporating a pocket planting and pollinator meadow is underway.

While the first projects were ambitious in scale, Gerde said it's possible to start small and expand.

"Projects don't have to be a 1-acre prairie," Gerde said. "Just putting in a 10 foot-by-10 foot plot is a great start."

Sherburne SWCD aims to establish 15 residential projects in the demonstration neighborhood. Gerde said community interest and project size will determine the final number. Grant-supported work must finish by Dec. 31, 2022.

Promotional efforts have included informational webinars and socially distanced site visits to scout prospective projects. The Big Eagle Lake Improvement Association has assisted Sherburne SWCD by promoting the program through communications to its members. The SWCD

offers other forms of assistance to those who don't receive financial reimbursement — such as help with developing a planting plan, and online resources such as BWSR's [Planting for Pollinators Habitat Guide](#).

Gerde's interest in protecting pollinators extends beyond her work with the demonstration neighborhood. Over the past three years, she's installed 300 square feet of native plantings in her Minneapolis yard, and she's helped friends and relatives start similar projects.

"Pollinator habitat is a big passion for me," Gerde said. "Having a good experience with a planting that looks nice but also provides valuable resources is important."