

Opening Proponent Testimony for Ohio Native Plant Month (HB 59)

Good afternoon Chairman Wiggam and members of the *House State and Local Government Committee*. There are three of us who have been heading the initiative to help Ohio become one of the first States in the country to have a month dedicated to native plants.

- **Hope Taft** – Former First Lady for the State of Ohio (1999-2007). Hope created the Heritage Garden at the Governor’s Residence which is the most extensive collection of Ohio native plants in the State. These magnificent gardens represent most of Ohio’s unique habitats arranged in a natural garden setting.
- **Nathan Johnson** – Director of Public Lands for the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) where he advocates for healthy ecosystems and Ohio’s great outdoors. The OEC’s mission is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home.
- **Nancy Linz** – A life-long Ohio gardener, and the head of horticulture for all garden clubs in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan who are part of the Garden Club of America, representing about 1000 members in Ohio.

When most people think of planting native plants, they think of planting nectar plants to help support monarch butterflies and other pollinators. But native plants are so much more than this!

Our Ohio native plants are important to pollinators, birds, insects, and all wildlife...including humans. They are part of an intricate, balanced web, that helps to filter and clean our drinking water, remove contaminants from the air we breathe, cool our planet, and pollinate most of our food crops. At the very core of this elaborate system, are our native plants.

Native plants are well adapted to Ohio’s local soils, temperatures, precipitation and environmental conditions. Because of this, they often require less water and little maintenance once established.

And native plants are beneficial to our native insects. Over thousands of years, our native insects have evolved alongside our native plants, and as a result, these insects are more tolerant of the unique chemical defenses of native plants. Today, our landscapes contain plants from around the world, but many of our insects have not evolved quickly enough to be able to eat these exotic foods. Our native insects are uniquely suited to thrive on our native plants.

Based on work by Dr. Doug Tallamy at the University of Delaware, native oak trees have been shown to support over 550 different species of caterpillars, whereas non-native Callery Pear trees (*Pyrus calleryana*) host only 1 caterpillar species. Our native plants are important for birds and the insects they need for survival. Almost 96% of our bird species raise their young on insects, not seed. And birds need a lot of insects! Dr. Tallamy found that it takes more than 4,800 caterpillars to raise just one brood of chickadees.

Pollinators are declining across the Midwest and the entire country. Native plants provide abundant nectar for important pollinators including hummingbirds, native bees, butterflies,

moths, and bats. Caterpillars of the iconic Monarch butterfly eat only native species of milkweed. Without native milkweeds, we would have no Monarchs.

There are a few plant species that, in addition to being non-native, are also highly invasive. Invasive plants can quickly dominate large areas and push out beneficial natives. Extremely aggressive, hard to control, and usually of little value to wildlife, these invasive plant species can overwhelm and destroy entire ecosystems. Researchers at NASA have stated that invasive species are, “perhaps the most devastating biological phenomenon of modern times.” Removal of highly invasive non-native plants should be a priority in Ohio.

Given the importance of our native plants, *every month* should be Native Plant Month. But having one month dedicated each year as Ohio Native Plant Month (ONPM) will serve as an annual reminder, placing emphasis on the importance of our native plants. Across the nation, there are towns, cities, or states, that have a day, week, or month dedicated to native plants, but there are surprisingly very few to date. The proposed bill would make Ohio one of the first States in the country to have a month dedicated to native plants.

Last August we conducted a survey among a sample of people across the State of Ohio representing home gardeners, landscapers, landscape designers, nurserymen, garden centers, greenhouse growers, arboretums, garden clubs, and non-profits including zoos, parks, nature centers, and others in the green industry. Based on their feedback, 99% supported the idea of having an Ohio Native Plant Month, and April was identified as the best month for all of Ohio. It turns out that April is the month our State Wildflower, the trillium, is in bloom. It is also the month of both Arbor Day and Earth Day. In our survey, most indicated that they would be willing to help support and promote Ohio Native Plant Month if approved.

Since August, we have heard from hundreds of people across the State of Ohio excited about the possibility of having an Ohio Native Plant Month. Some non-profit organizations said they would use April to offer special classes and workshops dedicated to native plants. These events would focus on both the removal of invasive non-native plant species, and the planting of native trees, shrubs, perennials and wildflowers.

In April, students are in school, offering numerous educational opportunities to learn about the benefits of planting native plants. Students should be taught to identify non-native plants and insects, the importance of removing invasive plants from our communities, and the economic and environmental benefits of supporting and protecting native plants.

There are hundreds of native plant species in Ohio, and many are underutilized in both the nursery industry and by home gardeners. Many of these plants offer beautiful, showy flowers, produce attractive fruits and seed pods, and display vibrant colors in the fall. Having a dedicated Native Plant Month in Ohio would give the nursery and landscaping industries a platform for increasing outreach and boosting sales. By building and leveraging public awareness through advertising and point-of-purchase displays, and by offering a greater selection of plants, Ohio businesses will have the opportunity to boost early spring sales.

A recent *Washington Post* article by Adrian Higgins shed light on the increasing shortage of employees in horticulture, botany, plant sciences, and related fields. His article, "The horticulture industry age problem is bigger than you think," discusses the fact that many young people have not heard of horticulture or are unaware of employment opportunities in this or related areas. According to Higgins, "The gulf between jobs and takers is so obvious and alarming to insiders that more than 150 green industry employers, colleges, botanical gardens and others in April launched a national initiative seeking to reverse the decline." Building awareness of native plants in Ohio will help encourage citizens to seek jobs in the horticulture field.

Making April Ohio Native Plant Month will establish Ohio as one of the first in the nation to formally recognize the importance of native plants. It will allow us to renew our commitment to the removal of non-native invasive plant species, and the planting of beneficial native species. And it will provide a platform for the horticulture industry, home gardeners, schools, public agencies, and non-profit organizations to work together to restore and improve the health of Ohio's natural ecosystems. Please vote to support HB 59.