



Proponent Testimony for Ohio Native Plant Month (SB 45)

As the Director of the Center for Conservation at the Cincinnati Nature Center, I am charged with directing both our Stewardship and Education departments. In addition, I am tasked with helping to coordinate collaborative conservation initiatives with like-minded partners across the region. My focus is keenly at the intersection of land management and public engagement in conservation. As a plant ecologist, I have dedicated my life to the preservation and restoration of native habitats. In particular, I have focused on how the spread of invasive, exotic species has impacted native plant communities, and how professional land managers like me must embrace our role as community educators if we are to develop lasting solutions to these challenges.

The state of Ohio has roughly 1800 native plant species, but most residents do not fully understand what a native species is, not to mention why they are important. Perhaps with the exception of the Ohio Buckeye, few people rally around native plants. In a sense, they are unable to experience, or at least fully appreciate, the ecological patriotism that Ohio's wild places can instill in us. Indeed, one's patriotism should extend to the natural world, yet so few places in our country have embraced the role native plants play in creating our sense of home. Very genuinely, the concept of an Ohio Native Plant Month makes me so proud of the state I adopted as my home when I moved to Cincinnati nearly 20 years ago.

Ohio is quite special as far as native plants go. We are only ranked 35 or so in terms of the number of plant species our state has, but we have an enormous diversity of habitat types, each with its own unique assemblages of native plants. Over millions of years, complex ecological relationships have formed between these plants and the other wildlife that depend on them. Today, for instance, an estimated 90% of herbivorous insects are specialists, and feed exclusively on 3 or fewer native species. When left intact, these complex systems provide us with clean air, water, and fertile soils. They provide resilience after natural disasters, and provide a wealth of benefits to human health.

But, in addition to the 1800 or so native plant species in our state, there are another 700 species of exotic plants, 100 of which are invading natural areas and displacing native species. This effectively breaks many of the evolutionary relationships between plant and wildlife species. Ecologists studying these broken systems report changes to the soil, hydrology, and other fundamental properties of ecosystems. These changes threaten vital ecosystem services like water filtration, nutrient cycling, and erosion control. The spread of invasive species is also a leading threat to native biodiversity and the loss of threatened and endangered species – second only to habitat loss from irresponsible development. If we want to leave future generations of Ohioans with a rich natural legacy that gives them their own pride of place, we must start by promoting and celebrating our native plant species.

Many of our invasive plant species were introduced to the US through the horticulture industry and subsequently cared for by homeowners who were unaware that these exotic species would or could cause such significant damage to native ecosystems. Today, professionals like me whose job it is to manage and restore native habitats have focused on eradicating invasive species where they occur, an expensive and arduous task. Reactive management like this is absolutely necessary, but reaction alone will not solve the problem. Pro-active collaboration among professionals and public education are not only less expensive, but ultimately more effective at reducing the future spread of invasive species. For example, last year, a partnership between conservation researchers and members of the horticulture industry co-developed legislation that banned the distribution or sale of 38 invasive plants in Ohio. Successfully bridging the divide between ecologists and horticulturalists was monumental, and is now allowing us to more pro-actively manage our natural resources by reducing the number of invasive plants available on the market.

The next step is to bridge the gap between these professionals and the homeowners who are confronted with a menagerie of botanical options at their local big box store. By designating April as Native Plant Month, we will give Ohioans an opportunity to learn about *our* plants, *our* biodiversity, *our* natural heritage. It will give conservation-

focused organizations across the state the chance to collaboratively focus our public education efforts on Ohio's native plants, and it will help businesses that are already selling native plants to homeowners.

The greenhouse and nursery industry in Ohio earns approximately \$400 million dollars a year, and a growing number of businesses, non-profits, and other conservation-minded organizations are now growing and selling native plants, including the Cincinnati Nature Center. These efforts are managing to increase the supply of native plants in the market, and a broad-scale public education campaign like Ohio Native Plant Month will help increase the number of people who want to buy native.

I am here in support of this bill because I want my children to be thrilled by exploding jewelweed seed pods. I want them to see a monarch butterfly emerging from its green, gem-like cocoon. I want them to celebrate the coming of autumn by eating paw paw ice cream and drinking paw paw beer. I want them to experience the rancid beauty of skunk cabbage, and discover the simple joy of collecting the jug-like flowers of wild ginger. Whether one's interest is more ecological or economical, the preservation and celebration of our natural resources is simply the right thing to do. Our state has so much natural beauty. From the shores and islands of Lake Erie to the ancient caves of Hocking Hills, Ohio has much to be proud of, and I want people to know it.

In a spirit of shared patriotism for our state, I hope you will vote in support of SB 45.