



City of Charleston

POLLINATOR GARDEN GUIDE

CREATING POLLINATOR-FRIENDLY GARDENS THAT MEET CITY CODE



GOAL

This guide aims to support the creation of intentional pollinator gardens on private property while also providing the necessary information to ensure residents understand how to comply with Charleston's code.



CITY OF CHARLESTON

POLLINATOR GARDEN GUIDE



POLLINATORS ARE ESSENTIAL TO HUMAN LIFE

Did you know that a significant portion of our food supply—fruits, vegetables, and nuts—depends on pollination by animals and insects like bees, butterflies, moths, ants, and birds?

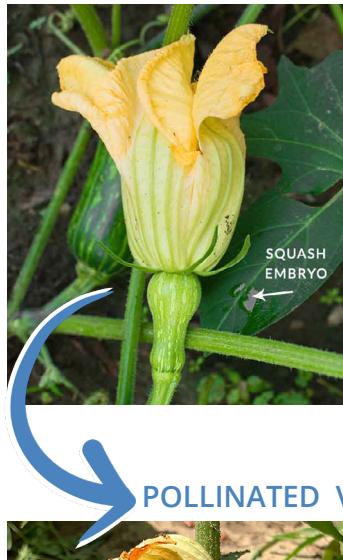
In fact, one-third of the food that reaches our plates is made possible by these essential creatures!



That's why Charleston is proud to be a Bee City USA Affiliate, since 2021!

Meaning, Charleston is committed to conserving pollinators by creating safe habitats, reducing pesticide use, and promoting native plants to best support them.

POLLINATION EXAMPLE



Left: A young squash embryo with a blossom on top awaits pollination. Its vibrant flower attracts nearby pollinators.

Without pollination and the right circumstances, the squash embryo won't develop into fruit.



POLLINATED VS. UNPOLLINATED



Left: After successful pollination, the squash begins to grow, eventually becoming a delicious addition to your harvest.

Right: If the squash embryo isn't pollinated or lacks enough resources, the plant will abort it, causing it to wither and die.

WHAT IS A POLLINATOR GARDEN?

A pollinator garden is a thoughtfully designed space featuring native plants which offer crucial food (nectar, pollen, and specific leaves) and habitat for pollinators like insects and birds.

Unlike wild areas that can often sustain themselves, urban pollinator gardens need careful planning and ongoing stewardship to flourish.

BENEFITS OF POLLINATOR GARDENS

- Provide Beauty:** Pollinator gardens add vibrant flowers and natural beauty to your landscape.
- Support Local Ecosystems:** They provide food, shelter, and resources for pollinators, supporting biodiversity and a healthy environment for all.
- Save Time and Money:** Native plants thrive in the Lowcountry's unique conditions, needing less water, fertilization, and maintenance when planted in the right location. Many species are adapted to tolerate saltwater, and their deep roots help prevent erosion and reduce flooding.
- Enhance Edible Garden Productivity:** With more pollinators visiting your garden, you'll see improved fruit and vegetable yields.

4 STEPS TO CREATE A COMPLIANT POLLINATOR GARDEN

STEP 1: PLAN YOUR GARDEN

Location: Choose a purposeful spot on your private property, ideally in full sun (6+ hours of sunlight.)

If your space is partially shaded, you can still create a thriving garden by selecting plants suited for part sun or shade.

Soil: Observe your site to identify your soil type and average moisture level (wet, medium, or dry). Ensure you choose plants suitable for your soil conditions. If you're unsure, consider getting a [soil test](#) and taking the results to a nursery for guidance.

Define Edges: Plan to clearly define the garden bed edges. Materials like stone, wood or other edgers make maintenance easier by keeping mulch inside the bed and the lawn out.

Buffer: Leave a few feet, if possible, between your garden and public property lines; or ensure shorter plants are located near public sidewalks and roadways.

This gives your garden a buffer if your flowers grow bigger than expected and prevents a scenario where pruning back flowering plants on a sidewalk may be necessary.



Above/Right: Edge treatments can use various materials—opt for natural or re-purposed options when possible. For example, recovering and reusing old brick from a local demolition project.



STEP 1 2 3 4

4 STEPS TO CREATE A COMPLIANT POLLINATOR GARDEN

STEP 2: SELECT NATIVE PLANTS

Many native plants have vibrant blossoms—pick your favorites! They're ideal for supporting pollinators and adapted to thrive in the Lowcountry.

Diversity: Choose a variety of plants that bloom at different times to provide year-round food and habitat. Cluster a few of the same species together and consider other [design approaches](#) to support pollinators year-round and keep your garden colorful and vibrant. Include host plants—specific plants that insects rely on for food, habitat, or laying eggs. Goldenrod, our state wildflower, is a host plant supporting over 100 pollinator species!

Pro Tip: Make a list of the plants you choose and track the bloom periods—fill any gaps next season.

Grasses and Sedges: Choose “clumping”, native grasses to support nesting, seeds for birds, and habitat. Avoid “spreading” grasses, as they can grow aggressively and easily create an unkempt look, and potentially violate code. This will simplify maintenance and keep your garden tidy.

Recommended Native Plants: Choose a mix of perennials and annuals to ensure year-round blooms and consistent support for pollinators.

For a list and pictures of native pollinator plants for the Charleston area, as well as local native plant nurseries, [click here](#).

Pro Tip: The [Carolina Yards Plant Database](#) can be sorted by natives and pollinators!



Above: A butterfly sips sugary nectar from an SC native plant, Joe-Pye Weed. (Source: Roots and Shoots Nursery)



Above: A monarch caterpillar feeds on Milkweed, its essential host plant—they can only lay their eggs and feed as caterpillars on Milkweed.

With their voracious appetites, caterpillars will cause some leaf damage, however, host plants are adapted to regrow quickly. Grouping host plants together helps if caterpillars arrive in large numbers. (Source: Roots and Shoots Nursery)

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4 STEPS TO CREATE A COMPLIANT POLLINATOR GARDEN

STEP 3: PLANTING AND MAINTENANCE

Planting & Spacing: Follow plant recommendations for spacing to ensure room for growth. Cluster 5-7 of the same species together, keep height in back and shorter plants up front, and apply other [landscape design best practices](#) to create a beautiful garden.

Watering: Water plants until established. Afterward, native plants typically don't require irrigation.

Pesticides: Avoid pesticides, as they harm pollinators and spraying for one particular insect will often affect all insects. If necessary, use organic or natural methods like traps or non-toxic soaps first. Remember, some leaf damage is normal and a sign of a thriving ecosystem.

Mulching: Add natural materials (pine straw, wood chips, leaf mulch, etc.) to hold moisture, suppress weeds, create habitat and maintain a tidy look.

Ground Habitat: Leave some bare patches of undisturbed ground in your garden or under shrubs and trees to support ground-nesting pollinators like native bees. These areas provide essential nesting and overwintering sites for pollinators.

Cutting Back Plants: At the end of the growing season, leave a few pithy and hollow plant stems 6-18 inches above the ground. This preserves critical nesting habitat for solitary bees and other insects.

Weeding: Regularly weed and trim to prevent overgrowth. Invasive plants and weeds tend to grow faster than native plants and must be removed to prevent them from out-competing the natives.

[List of invasive species in South Carolina.](#)

STEP

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Above: Pollinators, like this native bee, require places to nest and overwinter, such as bare ground, hollow stems, and other natural materials. (Source: <https://xerces.org/>)



Above: The hollow center of this broken flower stem is plugged with neatly cut leaf pieces, a telltale sign of a leaf-cutter bee nesting inside. (Source: <https://xerces.org/>)



Above: Some leaf damage is normal! These "C" shapes on the Redbud leaf were cut by a native bee gathering material for its nest. (Source: Roots and Shoots Nursery)

4 STEPS TO CREATE A COMPLIANT POLLINATOR GARDEN

STEP 4: COMPLIANCE WITH CITY CODE

Use the checklist below to ensure your pollinator garden is aligned with the City of Charleston's code.

- Tidy Appearance:** Prune and tidy as needed to prevent unsightly appearance.
- Clear Edges:** Maintain clearly defined garden borders and any paths through or around the bed.
- Height:** Keep plants at a manageable height to ensure they remain easy to care for and don't become unruly. Design your planting plan so tall plants are in back, and shorter are up front.
- Mowed Turf:** Keep lawns around the garden bed mowed to distinguish between lawn and garden.
- Remove Invasive Weeds:** Regularly remove weeds, particularly invasive or aggressive species, to prevent them from overtaking native plants.
- Plant Species Identification:** Inform a curious neighbor or code enforcement officer what native plants are in your bed and how they help pollinators. Consider adding small plant labels or pollinator signage to help educate and inform others.

Remember:

HOA rules may differ from City code, so prioritize compliance with your HOA first.

This guide is for explanation purposes only and is by no means meant to be a substitution for the official City of Charleston Code of Ordinances.



Above: A clear edge helps define a garden bed, which is part of maintaining compliance with city code.



Above: A clear edge doesn't have to be perfectly manicured; it simply needs to define the space. Notice how the intentionally planted turf is neatly mowed to maintain the overall appearance.

STEP **1** **2** **3** **4**

EXAMPLES

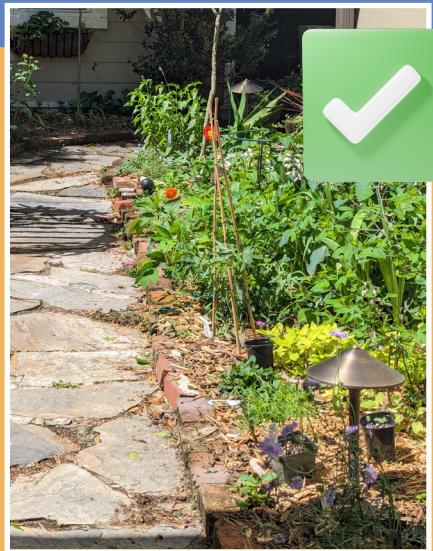
POLLINATOR GARDENS VS. NEGLECTED YARDS

POLLINATOR GARDENS

Intentional Planting: Purposefully arranged plants with clear pathways and defined garden beds with clean edges.

Plant Diversity: A variety of native plants, flowers, and shrubs that attract pollinators are purposely selected and included.

Regular Maintenance: Regularly maintained with pruned plants, removal of weeds and invasive species, clear borders and pathways, and mulched beds.



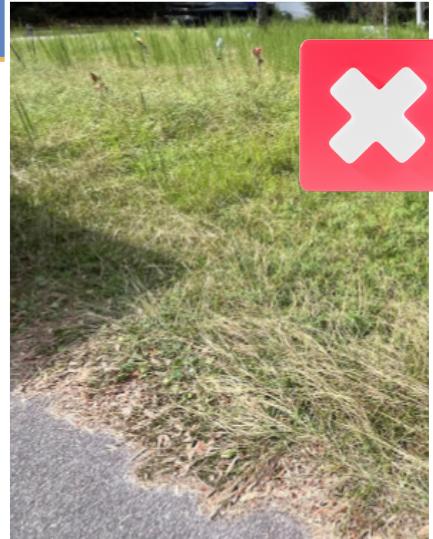
Above: Creating a pollinator garden involves purposeful planning, plant diversity, and consistent upkeep, resulting in a supportive environment for pollinators and a beautiful yard! (Source: Roots and Shoots Nursery)

NEGLECTED YARDS

Lack of Structure: No defined garden beds, planting areas or clean edges; plants grow randomly.

Lack of Diversity: Few native plants, few flowers, and a limited variety of plants.

Poor Maintenance: Overgrown plants or grass, many unhealthy or dead plants, and the presence of invasive species or weeds, often encroaching into streets and sidewalks. A generally unkempt and unsightly appearance.



Above: While tall grasses in a neglected yard do offer habitat for some pollinators, this unkempt appearance does not comply with city code and is better suited for more wild, open spaces, out of public view.

MAXIMIZE YOUR POLLINATOR IMPACT

Signage: Add a sign to identify your garden as pollinator-friendly and raise community awareness.

Pro Tip: Request a free pollinator garden sign from the City's [Keep Charleston Beautiful](#) Program!



Provide Water: If you have space, install a shallow birdbath or water fountain to give pollinators a place to drink. Even a small dish works!

Places to Sit: Relax on a garden bench or chair and watch pollinators in action—it's a perfect learning moment for kids and a peaceful way to enjoy nature.

Community Involvement: Join local gardening groups or programs for additional support. Many offer free native plants or host workshops with free cuttings.

Neighborhood Outreach: Organize a neighborhood garden tour or community pollinator workshop to share knowledge and resources, such as cuttings and seeds. You can also share your experiences and observations on social media or at neighborhood meetings to encourage wider participation.

"Leave the Leaves", or Move Them a Bit: Leaving leaves and old flower stems in garden beds provides essential winter shelter for pollinators. They also improve soil quality, suppress weeds, retain moisture, and insulate native perennials. To keep your yard tidy while supporting pollinator habitat, rake leaves into garden beds or around trees in fall and wait until late spring to move them, after the pollinators emerge.

"No-Mow March": As warm weather arrives, pollinators emerge from their winter homes under leaves and grasses. In Charleston, this mostly happens in March. To support pollinator nesting, the City observes "No-Mow March," encouraging light or no mowing during this slower growth period.

To Participate in No-Mow March: It is strongly advised to use the City's pollinator garden signage. One side features "No-Mow March: To Allow Pollinators to Thrive," and the other supports year-round pollinator care, letting you rotate it each March to inform the community of your extra efforts.



Above: While this lawn usually needs cutting to meet City code, it is acceptable during "No-Mow March" to provide essential food and habitat for emerging pollinators.



Above: Leaves from the lawn were purposely raked into the pollinator garden and left amongst some broken flower stems for pollinators to nest in throughout winter.

(Source: <https://xerces.org/>)

RESOURCES & PARTNERS

RESOURCE LINKS

- [City of Charleston Bee City USA Pollinator Program](#)
- [Bee City USA Chapter - Charleston SC](#)
- [Bee City USA Pollinators](#)
- [Xerces Society - Pollinator Conservation](#)
- [Pollinator Partnership - Guides](#)
- [SC Wildlife Federation - Enhancing Pollinator Habitat](#)
- [Clemson Extension - Pollinators](#)
- [Clemson HGIC - Pollinator Gardening](#)
- [Clemson Extension - Bee a Friend Program](#)
- [Clemson HGIC - Low Maintenance Landscape Ideas](#)
- [The Beecause - Pollinator Resources](#)
- [Xerces Society - Leave the Leaves Blog](#)

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR MANY PARTNERS!

This guide was made possible by the collaboration of many brilliant minds—our heartfelt thanks to these organizations and many others, especially Roots and Shoots Nursery for sharing wisdom and pictures!

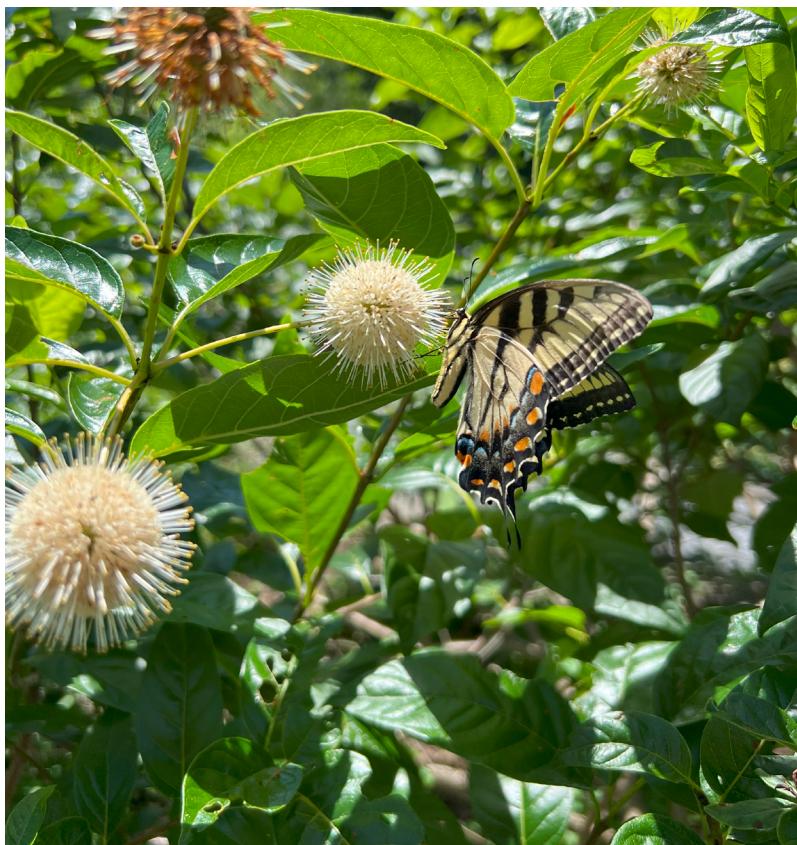


LOCAL NATIVE PLANT NURSERIES

Below are some local shops that offer valuable resources and knowledgeable staff to assist you in selecting the best native plants to support pollinators in your garden!

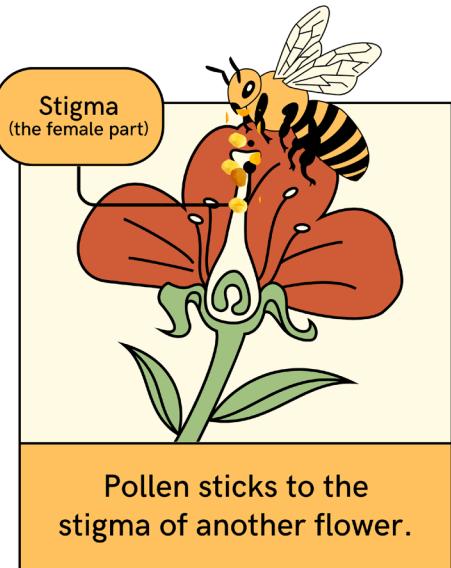
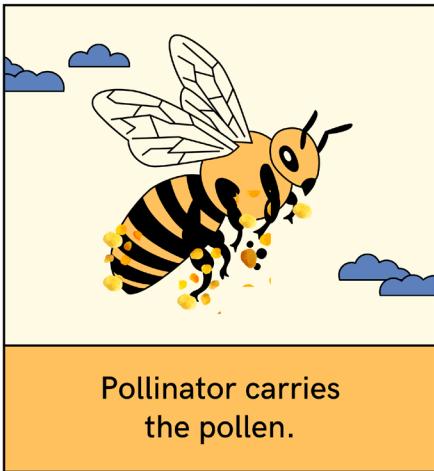
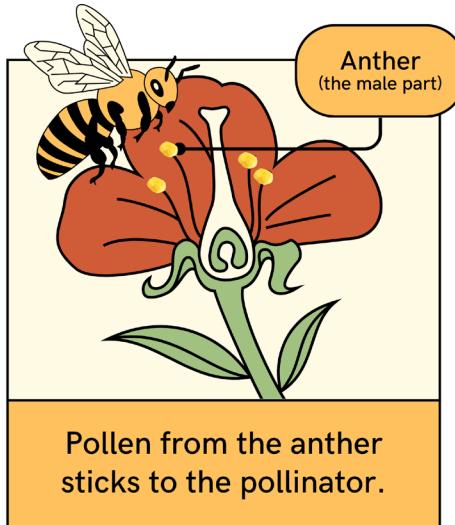
- [Roots and Shoots Nursery - Pollinator Gardens: Benefits, Tips, and Tricks](#)
- [Native Plants to the People for the Lowcountry](#)
- [Brown's Wood Nursery - 15 Native Plants for Lowcountry Gardens](#)
- [Rita's Roots - Garden Pollinators](#)
- [SC Native Plant Society - Native Plant Nurseries](#)

Below: A butterfly samples the blooms of the SC native Buttonbush plant. (Source: Roots and Shoots Nursery)



POLLINATION

allows plants to reproduce



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IF THE BEE DISAPPEARED
OFF THE SURFACE OF THE GLOBE,
THEN MAN WOULD HAVE ONLY
FOUR YEARS OF LIFE LEFT.

NO MORE BEES,
NO MORE POLLINATION,
NO MORE PLANTS,
NO MORE ANIMALS,
NO MORE MAN.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN