

Native Habitat Collaborative Meeting 26-5-28

[Video Link](#)

Key Takeaways

- Olivia from The Watershed Institute presented its spring rain garden and native planting initiative, covering 12 gardens, ~3,700 sq ft of garden space, nearly 7,000 plants, and over 500 students and volunteers across Mercer County and Trenton schools.
 - Olivia detailed the extensive planning process, including NEPA compliance, site visits, budgeting across multiple grants, and logistics coordination.
 - The group discussed the volunteer section of the NHC website and a proposed community email newsletter managed by Kari Lloyd to centralize event announcements.
 - The final simplified logo for the Native Habitat Collaborative was unveiled. Thanks to Annette Earling from Friends of Washington Crossing and graphic designer for her help in cleaning up the design and providing useable formats.
 - Practical challenges including mugwort management, tree protection tubes, working with school children outdoors, and bee/tick concerns were discussed.
 - Next month's meeting will feature Marianne Borge presenting on Lambertville Goes Wild, including lawn-to-native-plant subsidies and also a report from the EcoPTO.
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Discussed Topics

Welcome and Introductions

Terry opened the meeting with a small group in attendance, noting that many participants catch up via recordings and notes. Nancy introduced herself as a Master Gardener interested in environmental protection.

Tree Protection Tubes Discussion

A discussion arose about the effectiveness of plastic tree protection tubes, prompted by Nancy's observations on the Poland Skill Trail where approximately 100 tubes showed no visible tree growth after 20 years.

- **Details**
 - Nancy: Expressed strong dislike for plastic tubes, citing repeated observations of failed plantings and suggesting heat buildup may kill the trees inside.

- The Watershed (Olivia): Suggested the lighter color of tubes reduces heat issues and that lack of maintenance — not heat — is more likely the cause of failure, as tubes were never removed and plants may have been eaten or overgrown.
 - Terry: Noted that caging is used for larger trees and tubes for smaller ones to prevent buck rub; acknowledged the aesthetic problem and suggested a better-looking solution could be commercially valuable.
 - Nancy: Shared a positive example from a Native Plant Society project in Manville's floodplain, where larger trees were planted with soft-coated mesh cages, resulting in high survival rates after one year.
 - Kelly: Noted that Mike Long or Mike Van Clef would be better resources to answer the question definitively.
- **Conclusion**
 - No definitive answer was reached on tube effectiveness; Mike Long or Mike Van Clef were identified as subject matter experts to consult.
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Native Habitat Collaborative Logo Reveal

Terry shared the updated NHC logo, redesigned and cleaned up by Annette Earling of Friends of Washington Crossing, a professional graphic designer.

- **Details**
 - Terry: Explained that the logo retains the mycorrhizal web concept, with leaves representing member projects. Annette recommended simplifying rather than adding detail (e.g., birds or butterflies), and prepared the logo in formats suitable for various uses.
 - Kelly: Expressed approval of the logo.
 - **Conclusion**
 - The simplified logo was accepted and will be used going forward unless there is significant objection.
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Volunteer Section of the NHC Website

Terry presented a draft survey intended to populate a volunteer opportunities section on the NHC website, allowing organizations to list the types of volunteer work they seek.

- **Details**

- Terry: Described survey fields including organization name, mission description, volunteer opportunity description, and checkboxes for types of work (drop-in work days, ongoing assignments, outreach at events, event assistance, docent programs, individual/group projects, Scout projects, special skills-based projects, and other).
- Kelly: Raised concern that listing all organizations in one place could be overwhelming for volunteers; suggested the site function as a clearinghouse. Also asked whether a standing list of interested volunteers could be maintained for direct outreach during planting events.
- Terry: Acknowledged the risk of information overload but noted the value for volunteers with specific skills or preferences (e.g., grant writers, graphic designers). Confirmed that contact information for each organization would be included. Noted that organizations with multiple sub-projects could submit multiple listings.

- **Conclusion**

- The survey draft was reviewed and generally approved; Terry will refine it and send it to member organizations. The volunteer email list concept was noted as potentially addressed by Kari Lloyd's newsletter initiative (discussed next).

Carrie Lloyd's Community Events Email Newsletter

Terry introduced an existing informal email newsletter run by Kari Lloyd (of the Hopewell NJ Native Plant Swap group), which aggregates local environmental events and currently reaches approximately 300 subscribers.

- **Details**

- Terry: Described Kari's ad hoc newsletter, which has included events such as a Plant Swap, Herrontown Woods Earth Day, Gardens for Wildlife Zoom talks, forest restoration at Washington Crossing, and FOHVOS hikes. Proposed formalizing it so member organizations know to submit announcements to Kari.

- Kelly: Noted this could partially address the need for a volunteer pool for planting events, though expressed that the geographic scope (initially proposed as Hopewell Valley) may be too narrow for Mercer County-wide needs.
- Terry: Agreed the scope could be broader and that Kari would likely include Kelly's events.
- Outlined proposed criteria:
 - one-time events or workshops (not every recurring workday),
 - local/regional focus,
 - organizations submit an image and event details,
 - newsletter distributed approximately twice a month on a flexible schedule possibly less often in winter slow season
- Kelly: Suggested the newsletter could carry the Native Habitat Collaborative name for brand recognition, though acknowledged it is Kari's platform.
- Terry: Noted a name for the newsletter is still being developed; "Kari's Newsletter" was floated as a casual option.
- **Conclusion**
 - Kari Lloyd has agreed to continue and formalize the newsletter. Member organizations are encouraged to submit event announcements to her. A name for the newsletter is still to be determined and more details will follow on how best to submit.

Rain Garden and Native Planting Project Presentation (Olivia / The Watershed Institute)

Olivia presented a comprehensive overview of the spring 2026 rain garden and native planting initiative conducted across 12 sites in Mercer County and beyond.

Project Statistics

- 12 gardens planted with 12 partner groups
- 3,700 sq ft of new or replanted garden space
- 6,920 students and volunteers involved

- 532 native plants in the ground across 15 species

Funding and Partners

- **Details**
 - The Watershed (Olivia): Funding came from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), NJ Department of Education, and Hopewell Valley Education Foundation. Partners included Hopewell Valley School District, Allentown High School (Upper Freehold School District), Trenton Public Schools, Mercer County Community College, NJDEP Watershed Ambassadors, AmeriCorps, Hopewell Valley EcoPTO, Delos Landscaping, and numerous volunteer teachers and parents.

Planning Process

- **Details**
 - Olivia: Detailed the extensive planning required, including: NEPA compliance (new NFWF requirement for federally/state endangered species lists and State Historic Preservation Office clearance); site visits evaluating visibility, water source proximity, emergency overflow, accessibility, truck access, and school operational needs; multi-grant budgeting (NFWF and NJ DOE); and a delivery/planting calendar shared with all principals.
 - Kelly: Asked what triggered the NEPA requirement; Olivia confirmed it was a new NFWF rule, noting it felt disproportionate for small pollinator gardens but was a grant requirement.
- **Conclusion**
 - Early and thorough planning — especially NEPA compliance and stakeholder communication — was essential to the project's success.

Trenton School Gardens

- **Details**
 - Olivia: Described gardens at Mercer County Community College (revitalized bioswale/rain garden alleyway with horticulture students taking over maintenance), Darlene McKnight Elementary (raised beds for six second-grade classes with butterfly kits), Stokes Elementary (low-bush blueberry pots), PJ Hill Elementary (native plants in existing empty raised beds with all grade levels

participating), and Monument Intermediate (assembled raised beds filled and planted by students).

- Olivia noted that lead soil testing at some Trenton schools necessitated above-ground raised beds rather than in-ground planting.

Allentown High School

- **Details**

- The Watershed (Olivia): Described a ~400 sq ft pollinator meadow expansion led by teacher Andrew Plunkett and Rachel Foster; the Watershed's role was plant supply, with the school providing students, site prep, and location.

Hopewell Valley School District Gardens

- **Details**

- The Watershed (Olivia): Six schools received gardens funded by the NJ DOE grant written by Carolyn McGrath. Weekend prep days involved volunteers of all ages. Gardens were designed with stormwater management elements (rock swales, perforated drainage pipes, downspout interception) though not full ponding rain gardens due to budget, logistics, and safety concerns near playgrounds. Deer fencing was installed at all sites. Schools included: Hopewell Elementary (drainage trench with perforated pipe), Tollgate Grammar School (downspout interception garden), Hopewell Valley High School (dense planting), Bear Tavern Elementary (450 sq ft garden addressing standing water/flooding), and Stony Brook Elementary (diamond-shaped garden with rotating 30-minute student planting shifts).
- Kelly: Asked about soil brought in; Olivia explained it was general garden soil with sand content to give plants a head start above the clay subsoil exposed after sod removal.
- Terry: Asked why full ponding rain gardens were not built; Olivia cited budget constraints, prevalence of storm drains at chosen sites, and safety concerns about ponding near playgrounds.
- Kelly: Confirmed that maintenance responsibility was transferred to the schools, supported by a second grant to fund garden club supervision and facilities coordination.

Lessons Learned

- **Details**

- The Watershed (Olivia): Key lessons included: start planning much earlier than expected; maintain clear communication throughout; be prepared for complex spreadsheet management with multiple grant funds; and always provide snacks for volunteers.

- **Conclusion**

- The project was highly successful. Curriculum integration and garden clubs are in place at Hopewell Valley schools to ensure ongoing maintenance and education. A rain garden celebration event was announced for the evening of the meeting at the high school.

Student Engagement and Outdoor Education Best Practices

Discussion followed on how to effectively engage students in garden planting and maintenance.

- **Details**

- Terry: Asked about student preparation in terms of why the gardens were important and follow-up plans.
- The Watershed (Olivia): Described pre-planting educational sessions in March for all Hopewell Valley third-grade classes covering garden purpose, soil compaction, native plants, and stormwater movement (including a tag game). Eighth grade and high school engineering classes took field trips to the Watershed Institute. Curriculum addressing the gardens has been written into multiple grade bands for ongoing use.
- Steve: Asked about logistical hurdles for working with students on school grounds (permission slips, etc.); Olivia confirmed that on-school-grounds activities generally require only teacher/principal approval, not parent permission slips.
- The Watershed (Olivia): Recommended a ratio of one knowledgeable adult per 10 children, pre-setting plants in the ground before students arrive, and immediately assigning teachers as active class managers rather than passive observers.
- Terry: Recommended doing as much instruction indoors before going outside or seating students outside for instruction, and shared a successful nature

journaling exercise where first graders drew garden plants before weeding, resulting in no accidental removal of desired plants.

- Kelly: Suggested assigning parent chaperones and teachers as team captains in advance.
- Terry: Proposed creating plant "trading cards" to help students identify and care for specific plants.

- **Conclusion**

- Effective student engagement requires structured ratios, pre-activity indoor instruction, clear teacher roles, and creative identification tools. Nature journaling was highlighted as a particularly effective technique for improving plant recognition before weeding.
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Bee and Tick Concerns in School Gardens

A brief discussion addressed parent and administrator concerns about bees and ticks in school garden settings.

- **Details**

- Terry: Noted past experience with parent pushback over bee allergies and general bee fear; outcomes depended on school administration's commitment to environmental education versus placating vocal parents.
- The Watershed (Olivia): Reported no pushback at Hopewell Valley (already environmentally oriented) or Trenton schools.
- The Watershed (Olivia): Noted that wasps are arguably more dangerous than bees as they can sting repeatedly without dying and are found in many everyday locations.
- Kelly: Flagged ticks as another concern she needs to be prepared to address.
- Terry: Mentioned Rutgers' "Ticks for Science" program, which allows users to photograph and submit ticks for rapid identification, and noted it doubles as a community science activity for students. Referenced a recorded talk on tick facts that helps demystify the risk.
- Steve: Mentioned a recent Penn State tick talk as another resource.

- **Conclusion**

- Terry will locate and share the Rutgers tick talk resource with Kelly and also post in the resources section of the Collaborative website. The Rutgers "Ticks for Science" app/program was recommended as both an educational and practical tool.
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Mugwort Management

Kelly raised a concern about mugwort appearing in a newly planted garden at the Hopewell Branch Library, seeking non-herbicide management options.

- **Details**

- Kelly: Described mugwort patches approximately 10 inches in diameter across a roughly 6-foot total area, emerging through mulch in a new garden. Wants to avoid herbicide at this stage.
- Steve: Advised that without herbicide, management is a "war of atrophy": allow mugwort to grow until mid-June (after it exhausts root stores), cut it to 2–3 inches, wait for re-sprouting, then cut again in September. Cautioned that pulling small clumps risks activating the seed bank. Noted that even with professional-grade herbicide treatments, mugwort can disappear for a year and then return. Recommended acting quickly while the infestation is still small.
- Terry: Shared personal experience of mugwort invading and destroying half a thriving pollinator garden; used Triclopyr spot spraying followed by cardboard and mulch suppression with apparent success, though Mike Van Clef remains skeptical about permanent eradication. Noted mugwort runners can penetrate under raised beds.
- Steve: Described a pilot program using milestone-resistant seed mixes in the Pinelands (no-herbicide zone), allowing targeted milestone application without harming desirable natives. Recommended treating mugwort similarly to knotweed — mow in June to force a second root purge, then treat the weakened plant.
- Terry: Relayed Mike Van Clef's recommendation of milestone herbicide application in fall when mugwort is at full size.
- Kelly: Expressed intent to keep pulling it rather than waiting, noting concern that every leaf acts as a solar panel feeding the root system.

- Steve: Confirmed that the full "solar panel array" is not yet deployed in late May, so pulling now is still reasonable, but cautioned that small plants are harder to extract by root.
 - Terry and Steve: Both recommended consulting Mike Van Clef and Jen Rogers as the most knowledgeable local experts on small-population mugwort management without herbicide.
 - **Conclusion**
 - For small infestations, act immediately before the root system expands. The June mow-and-exhaust strategy is recommended if herbicide is not to be used. Kelly will consult Jen Rogers and Mike Van Clef for non-herbicide approaches. Mugwort is acknowledged as a persistent, difficult-to-eradicate invasive.
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Upcoming Meeting Preview

Terry announced the topic for the next monthly meeting.

- **Details**
 - Terry: Marianne Borge will present on Lambertville Goes Wild, including community subsidies for lawn-to-native-plant conversions and community activation strategies.
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Action Items

- **Terry**
 - Finalize and distribute the volunteer opportunities survey to NHC member organizations for the website volunteer section.
 - Coordinate with Kari Lloyd to formalize the community events email newsletter, establish submission guidelines, and determine a name for the newsletter.
 - Locate and share the Rutgers tick talk recording with Kelly and post on Collaborative website
 - Share the rain garden celebration event recording with the group once available (event held evening of 2026-05-28 at Hopewell Valley High School).
- **Kelly** (krypkema@mercercounty.org)

- Contact Jen Rogers and Mike Van Clef for advice on non-herbicide mugwort management at the Hopewell Branch Library garden.
- Sign up member organizations and encourage NHC network members to subscribe to Kari Lloyd's events newsletter.
- Research tick facts and talking points to address parent/community concerns at school garden events.
- **The Watershed (Olivia)**
 - Share the rain garden celebration recording from the Hopewell Valley High School event with the NHC group for broader access to curriculum and lesson plan details.
- **All member organizations**
 - Submit volunteer opportunity information via the NHC survey once distributed, for inclusion on the NHC website.
 - Begin sending event announcements to Kari Lloyd for inclusion in the community events newsletter.