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National Pollinator Week underscores the value of native plants

Plant native wildflowers from the MWRD and protect water quality, manage stormwater and improve pollinator habitat

Native plants stop erosion along Addison Creek, and in the process protect water quality, curb flooding and create a home for critically important pollinators.

National Pollinator Week is a good reason to start planting free native wildflowers from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD).

A renewed push to protect pollinators can also help the MWRD and residents manage stormwater and improve area water quality. To earn a free pack of wildflowers, visit mwrd.org and learn more about how native plants can help protect homes and communities from flooding while also giving pollinators a habitat.

"Our work managing stormwater and encouraging native plantings make us also an advocate of pollinators," said MWRD President Kari K. Steele. "We encourage residents across the Chicago area to spread more wildflower seeds from the MWRD and join us in growing more native plants."

Started by the Pollinator Partnership, the first Pollinator Week was observed in 2017 after unanimous support from the U.S. Senate. The week marks an international celebration of pollinator *(continued)*

health, recognizing and celebrating the invaluable work of pollinators and a call to protect them.

That protection is growing critical as pollinators, such as bees and butterflies, face the danger of going extinct. The Pollinator Partnership attributes this attrition to exposure to disease and parasites, loss of habitat, invasive species, harmful pesticides and climate change.

Since 2020, the MWRD has been part of the Illinois Monarch Project, which encourages the public to address conservation and engage public and private landowners to protect monarch butterflies from becoming extinct. During that time, the MWRD has planted more than 23 acres of milkweed among its native prairie landscaping, earned four monarch waystation certifications, and distributed more than 15,000 complimentary milkweed seed packets to Cook County area residents.

Now the MWRD is building on that momentum to expand protection for all pollinators. The MWRD Board of Commissioners kicked off this initiative by issuing a resolution at its June 15 meeting recognizing National Pollinators Week, and now gardeners and native plant supporters can pick up a packet of seeds by visiting the MWRD website and taking a pledge to protect pollinators.

Humans depend on pollinators, with about 80 percent of the world's crops requiring pollination. Healthy pollinator populations play a vital role in producing more than 150 crops grown in the United States, and honeybee pollination alone adds more than $18 billion in value to agricultural crops annually, studies show.

"We rely on pollinators to grow and eat food, and we rely on native plants to help us manage stormwa-ter, reduce flooding and erosion, and improve water quality," said MWRD Commissioner Mariyana Spyropoulos. "Please help us address both of these important missions and plant native wildflowers by visiting our website and taking the pledge."

In addition to milkweed and wildflowers, the MWRD has addressed stormwater management through a variety of green infrastructure solutions. Since 2014, the MWRD has distributed nearly 150,000 rain barrels, and since 2016, the MWRD has also distributed more than 100,000 oak tree saplings.

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water