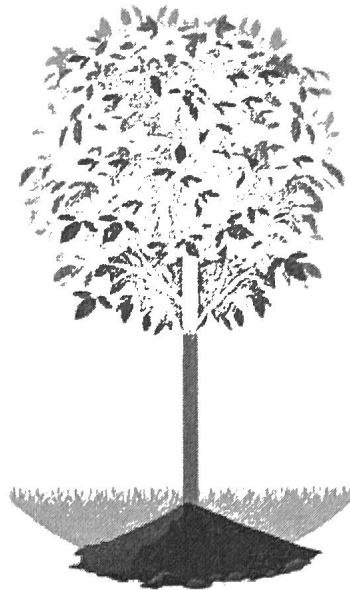


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The State We're In 7/5: Highway beautification – New Jersey styl

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By Michele S. Byers

Driving through a garden usually isn't a commuter experience, but drivers on the Atlantic City Expressway will see colorful patches of native flowers along the sides of the highway.

Though the wildflowers are beautiful, it's not all about appearance. The wildflowers are new ha for New Jersey's struggling insect pollinators, like bees and butterflies, which are declining due habitat loss and pesticides.

In an ecological version of roadside assistance, the South Jersey Transportation Authority, which runs the Atlantic City Expressway, recently planted 35 linear acres of native wildflowers along tl highway. They're also adding native trees and shrubs.

"We're trying to do our part," said Nick Marchese, the Transportation Authority project manager runs the Roadway Environmental Advancement Initiative (READI). "I've already seen that the be

have increased.”

That's not all. Plans include installing more than 120 bird houses, bat boxes and osprey nesting platforms along the Expressway to help South Jersey's native species. Culverts under the highway have been enlarged to provide safe crossings for animals like deer, raccoons and possums. Bird boxes and butterfly houses are up, and there's even a hummingbird garden under construction at the Hammonton rest stop.

If it sounds like the South Jersey Transportation Authority is the new model for environmental stewardship, it is.

The initiative started in 2011 with the planting of colorful annuals in patches along the Expressway. The flowers were pretty, but Marchese and his colleagues soon realized that native plants support birds, bees, butterflies and other insect pollinators.

In 2016, the Transportation Authority went native with perennials like black-eyed Susans, butterfly weed and coreopsis. They supplement the natives with easy-to-grow annuals like cosmos.

And instead of planting ornamental cherries, the Transportation Authority now plants native trees and shrubs like willows and dogwoods.

Natives cost more initially, but they pay for themselves over the long run.

“The Authority has reduced its dependence on petroleum-based, fossil fuels to help shrink its carbon footprint in the region, and the wildflowers help in this respect by removing 35 acres that need to be mowed regularly during the summer, saving time, money and carbon emissions released into the air,” explained South Jersey Transportation Authority Executive Director Stephen F. Dougherty.

The plantings also soak up stormwater runoff, helping to prevent highway flooding and filtering pollutants. The root systems of the new plantings prevent topsoil from eroding into streams and other waterways.

The READI program has a strong educational component. Marchese regularly visits elementary schools to talk about the importance of pollinators and the plants they need to thrive.

Students at the Gloucester County Institute of Technology and the carpentry technical program Camden County College build nesting boxes for bluebirds, screech owls, American kestrels, red-headed woodpeckers and bats. An intern from Stockton University monitors the nesting boxes and collects data.

Marchese hopes other highway agencies will think beyond barren rights-of-way and take advantage of the potential of all those highway acres to help pollinators and reduce mowing. "We really hope to be the example for other authorities," he said.

In September 2020, the South Jersey Transportation Authority will be the host to the Northeast Transportation and Wildlife Conference in Atlantic City, showcasing pollinator habitat along the Atlantic City Expressway.

Marchese hopes to keep expanding pollinator and bird habitat along the Expressway in the coming years. "The more you do," he observed, "the more you can see what can be done."

Kudos to the South Jersey Transportation Authority for leading the way in New Jersey.

For more information about READI initiative, go to <https://www.sjta.com/sjta/news.asp?publicationID=20>.

To learn more about creating pollinator habitat, go to www.nwf.org/garden-for-wildlife/about/natural-initiatives/plant-for-pollinators or <https://xerces.org/pollinator-conservation/agriculture/pollinator-habitat-installation-guides/>.

And for information about preserving New Jersey's land and natural resources, visit the New Jersey Conservation Foundation website at www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

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