

Park Views

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A summer afternoon in the garden is a celebration of diversity

The North Mountain Park (NMP) Demonstration Gardens are a canvas of flowering plants, home for wildlife, food for pollinator, and solace for people... Not to mention the pride and joy of our volunteers!

Right now, though, I'm the only human in the gardens. Nearby, families cheer from the ball field, reminding me that this is a real multi-use park. But this afternoon, I'm checking in on the non-human members of our community.

Squinting in the sunlight, the colors wash over me. Swaths of purple plants look similar at first, but they're courting diversity by growing at different heights. Catmint, lavender, purple-top vervain and creeping thyme make purple the primary shade right now, but there are sudden splashes of other colors too. Nasturtiums and red flax draw the eye in the Culinary Herb Garden. An early blanket flower flames out from a patch of green, and milkweed and yarrow grow in cotton-candy pillows.

A brewer's black bird swoops past me and lands in our Reptile and Amphibian Garden. He wades in the water, picking insects from the surface. Electric blue damselflies perch near the water feature too, reminding me that every good habitat garden should have a water source.

In the Bird Buffet garden, there's a jungle of big-leaved sunflowers, but no blossoms yet. Luckily, not everything in these gardens will bloom at once. The sunflowers will be food for pollinators and birds in the late summer and fall.

As liaison to the Bee City USA Ashland Subcommittee, I have pollinators on my mind. They are a vital link in every ecosystem and responsible for one out of every three bites of food we eat. At North Mountain Park we intentionally garden for pollinators and teach others to do the same.

Honey bees are by no means the only garden visitors. Cabbage white butterflies are common, and as I wonder about our butterfly diversity, I'm rewarded almost immediately with a sight of a little gold skipper. Then, a swallowtail drifts by, letting the wind carry her over to a Butterfly Garden bed that's grown a bit wild. That garden bed needs a volunteer's loving touch and we're looking for someone to adopt it. Perhaps someone who reads this article will be inspired to offer their help.

Something moves like a speck of dust over the flowering thyme. Upon closer inspection, I can make out several tiny green hoverflies, pollinating their way from blossom to blossom. The Shasta daisies sport a different variety of hoverfly, with wings held out from its body like a fighter jet, and a slim native bee, fuzzed with pollen.

A fat, yellow-faced bumble bee squeezes into a newly-opened California poppy and completely disappears. As he emerges, I notice his pollen load is poppy-orange, much darker than his fuzzy face. A new sound like a tiny motor flies past me, loud and urgent. This black bumble bee is huge, twice the size of my thumb, and a wobbly flier.

The Demo Gardens are a refuge for diversity, but they're also a teaching tool. I'm certainly learning a lot in just one quiet afternoon! People come here to learn, and volunteer gardeners conduct free garden tours every second-Wednesday through the summer.

Luckily though, we aren't the only game in town. There are now over 50 Bee City USA Ashland Approved gardens in our community! The NMP gardens are just one of 16 landscapes that will open their garden-gates to the public on June 29 and 30, for the 3rd Annual Bee City USA Pollinator Garden Tour.

I hope nature lovers will turn out to enjoy the Garden Tour and marvel at the diversity of plants and insects in our community. You can sign up now for a weekend full of exploration. Learn tips from habitat gardening experts, or just wander through, counting pollinators. Not a bad way to spend a day, if you ask me.

As the afternoon wears lazily on, I hear crickets and the "chortle-dee" of the redwing blackbirds. Taking one last look at a patch of catmint, I count 18 honey bees and one bright red lady bug, before leaving the garden to the creatures that call it home.