

## To Mow or Not to Mow: Supporting Native Biodiversity

By late summer and early fall one of our landscape's most magnificent and important keystone native plants is in full bloom: the humble but mighty goldenrod. The two dozen species of goldenrod native to New York support 104 species of caterpillars and 42 species of native bees, many of which provide important pollination services for our crops. The countless insects that are supported by goldenrod throughout the year also provide food for baby birds - it can take up to 9,000 caterpillars to rear one clutch of chickadees! The goldenrods' place at the center of the complex web of life is what makes them a keystone species.



Goldenrod supporting native pollinators

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Keystone native plants are the foundation of a healthy landscape. Without thriving and abundant populations of these plants, which include goldenrods, asters, and oaks (to name a few), native pollinators begin to decline and ecosystems can collapse. The recent Empire State Native Pollinator Survey, released in 2022 by the NYS DEC, found that at least 38% – and as many as 60% – of the pollinators targeted by the survey are at risk of extinction.



Goldenrods and asters, both crucial keystone native plants, grow best along roadsides and in fields where they are infrequently mowed or mowed during winter months. <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/asters-and-goldenrod-shawna-rowe.html>

One simple way to steward keystone plants and support pollinator populations is by changing the timing of when we mow our fields, orchards, road and driveway edges, and other areas where plants grow tall during the summer months. While mowing might keep these areas looking neat and tidy, mowing native plants like goldenrods while they are still growing prevents them from supporting the countless insects and creatures that rely on them. Frequent mowing also allows nonnative European grasses to edge out our native species. These grasses, familiar from lawns and hayfields may look clean and orderly, but they offer very little to the insects and animals that need to make a living on the landscapes we share. Over time, persistent mowing during the growing season can eliminate many native plants that are foundational to healthy landscapes.

The alternative: mowing during the winter months (December through March) allows native plants, including goldenrods, to maintain strong populations while still managing woody vegetation. Dormant season mowing is a key first step to support plants and food webs, but it's also important to note that many insects and native bees overwinter in the stems of native plants, including woody stemmed plants, meaning that over-frequent (annual) winter mowing can hurt native pollinator populations over time. One solution is to mow just once every two to four years during the late winter or early spring. This simple switch is a powerful and simple way to manage our landscapes for both native plants and pollinators, helping to ensure that our landscapes remain healthy, vibrant and resilient for years to come.

To learn more about managing your landscape and mowing strategies for native biodiversity, please reach out to the Gallatin Conservation Advisory Council at [Gallatincac@gmail.com](mailto:Gallatincac@gmail.com) and follow us on Instagram @gallatincac.