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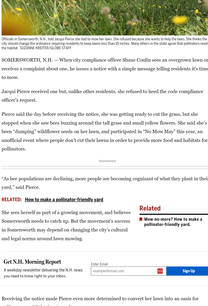
NH NEWS

Some N.H. residents are balking at an ordinance requiring them to cut their lawns

Receiving the notice made Jacqui Pierce even more determined to convert her lawn into an oasis for pollinators

By Amanda Gokee Globe Staff, Updated September 10, 2023, 8:00 a.m.



Officials in Somersworth, N.H., told Jacqui Pierce she had to mow her lawn. She refused because she wants to help the bees. She thinks the ordinance is "ridiculous" and is considering a move to Maine, where laws limit the ability of towns to force homeowners to cut their lawns. | SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

SOMERSWORTH, N.H. — When city compliance officer Shane Cudin sees an overgrown lawn or receives a complaint about one, he issues a notice with a simple message telling residents it's time to mow.

Jacqui Pierce received one but, unlike other residents, she refused to heed the code compliance officer's request.

Pierce said the day before receiving the notice, she was getting ready to cut the grass, but she stopped when she saw bees buzzing around the tall grass and small yellow flowers. She said she's been "damping" wildflower seeds on her lawn, and participated in "No Mow May" bee-saving, an unofficial event where people don't cut their lawns in order to provide more food and habitats for pollinators.

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"As bee populations are declining, more people are becoming cognizant of what they plant in their yard," said Pierce.

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She sees herself as part of a growing movement, and believes Somersworth needs to catch up. But the movement's success in Somersworth may depend on changing the city's cultural and legal norms around lawn mowing.

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Receiving the notice made Pierce even more determined to convert her lawn into an oasis for pollinators and fight the city ordinance.

"It's a dumb ordinance and it's outdated," she said. "I just couldn't even believe the ordinance existed."

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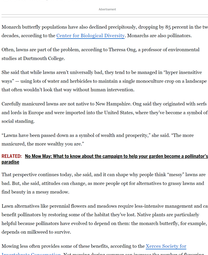
Homeowners in other parts of the country have fought this kind of ordinance and won.

Cudin said this is a first for him — a resident has never pushed back after receiving a courtesy notice from the city before. He said he hoses landrods per year, and has given out at least 50 so far this summer. "We get lots of complaints from neighbors," he said.



Jacqui Pierce in her yard in Somersworth, N.H., with a wildflower in the foreground. | SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Beyond an aesthetic concern, Cudin said overgrown lawns can blow weed seeds from one lawn to another and conceal rat or mice populations that can impact neighboring properties. The ordinance, which the city adopted in 2019 from the Green International Property Maintenance Code, requires properties to be free of weeds or plant growth longer than six inches, but it does allow for "cultivated flowers and gardens."

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"We don't have any specific definitions within our ordinance of what is allowed, between gardens or grass," Cudin said. So, in situations like this, "It's kind of up to interpretation of whether is in my position."

Cudin suggested that Pierce apply to become an official pollinator garden through the University of Maine, and Pierce is taking him up on the idea. "That way I'm doing it right and not just on the fly," which is basically what I have been doing," she said.

Pierce believes this could be a turning point for the city of Somersworth, which some local beekeepers are pushing to designate as a bee city to encourage people to plant more wildflowers and use less pesticides.

"I think there's a big movement starting," she said. "We're at the forefront of it and it'll get bigger as the years go on."

While pollination-like bees are critical to the food supply, they have been decimated by disease, climate change, the loss of habitat, and the use of pesticides. Last year, around half of managed colonies in the US died, and beekeepers have been losing around 30 percent of their hives per year since 2006, according to several studies.

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Monarch butterfly populations have also declined precipitously, dropping by 85 percent in the two decades, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. Monarchs are also pollinators.

Often, lawns are part of the problem, according to Theresa Ong, a professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College.

She said that while lawns aren't universally bad, they tend to be managed in "hyper insensitive ways" — using lots of water and herbicides to maintain a single monoculture crop on a landscape that often wouldn't look that way without human intervention.

Carefully manicured lawns are not native to New Hampshire. Ong said they originated with serfs and lords in Europe and were imported into the United States, where they've become a symbol of social standing.

"Lawns have been passed down as a symbol of wealth and prosperity," she said. "The more manicured, the more wealthy you are."

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That perspective continues today, she said, and it can shape why people think "messy" lawns are bad. But, she said, attitudes can change, as more people opt for alternatives to grassy lawns and find beauty in a messy meadow.

Lawn alternatives like perennial flowers and meadows require less-intensive management and can benefit pollinators by restoring some of the habitat they've lost. Native plants are particularly helpful because pollinators have evolved to depend on them: the monarch butterfly, for example, depends on milkweed to survive.

Mowing less often provides some of these benefits, according to the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. Not mowing during summer can increase the number of flowering plants and provide habitat for invertebrates that spend the winter in undisturbed areas.

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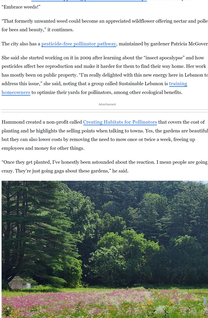
David Hammond has worked on planting 13 pollinator gardens in New Hampshire's Upper Valley over the past 3 years, and he said the difference is palpable. The gardens attract all kinds of life.



A pollinator honey bee in the yard of Jacqui Pierce in Somersworth, N.H. | SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

"They are almost humming, they're almost throbbing with activity. Just thousands and thousands of creepy crawlies, of bugs and moths and butterflies, all kinds of insects, and birds," he said.

He said he hasn't encountered much resistance to these projects, and he tries to head off disagreements before they begin by explaining the project will "be a little wild looking, but it's going to be beneficial." The city of Lebanon is supportive and has become a partner: offering up space at its municipal airport and a historic cemetery where Hammond has established gardens.

"Consider leaving areas of your lawn uncut and letting the wildflowers bloom!" the city encourages residents in a handout on supporting pollinators in the landscape. Another bullet point: "Embrace weeds!"

"That formerly unwanted weed could become an appreciated wildflower offering nectar and pollen for bees and beauty," it continues.

The city also has a pesticide-free pollinator pathway, maintained by gardener Patricia McGovern.

She said she started working on it in 2004 after learning about the "insect apocalypse" and how pesticides affect bee reproduction and make it harder for them to find their way home. Her work has mostly been on public property. "I'm really delighted with this new energy here in Lebanon to address this issue," she said, noting that a group called Sustainable Lebanon is training homeowners to optimize their yards for pollinators, among other ecological benefits.

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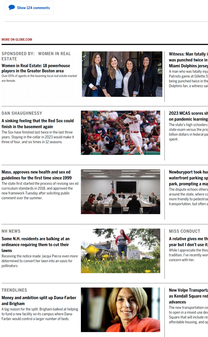
Hammond created a non-profit called Creating Habitats for Pollinators that covers the cost of planting and he highlights the selling points when talking to towns. Yes, the gardens are beautiful, but they can also lower costs by removing the need to mow once or twice a week, freeing up employees and money for other things.

"Once they get planted, I've honestly been astounded about the reaction. I mean people are going crazy. They're just going gaga about these gardens," he said.



David Hammond has worked on planting 13 pollinator gardens around New Hampshire's Upper Valley. | DAVID HAMMOND

Amanda Gokee can be reached at amanda.gokee@globe.com. Follow her: @amanda_gokee.

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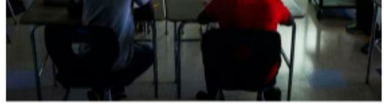

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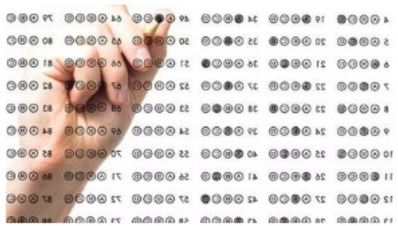

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