

# Connecticut Horticultural Society

# NEWSLETTER

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May 2026

## Making Nature Readable: Designing Landscapes People Will Accept

By Kathy Connolly

**Kathy Connolly is our featured speaker on May 28.  
Go to page 3 for details on her presentation.**

I had never heard the term *naturalized landscape* when I moved to my current home near the Connecticut River 30 years ago. But I was about to live with one.

The previous owner, Harold, gave me a 1991 soil test from the agricultural station before he left town. It described the soil as “loamy sand”—about 80 percent sand—with a pH of 4.1. Not exactly ideal conditions for a lush lawn. Harold told me about his attempts to establish what he called a “real lawn.” Seed failed. Repeatedly. He was advised to import topsoil, install irrigation, and commit to a regimen of fertilizers, pre-emergents, and pest treatments.

He declined.

Instead, in the late 1980s, he seeded little bluestem, big bluestem, and switchgrass. “Finally,” he said, “we got something that would grow.”

By the time I arrived in 1996, a portion of the property was more than 90 percent native grass, punctuated by yarrow, butterfly weed, partridge pea, and coreopsis. I didn’t have language for it then, but I had inherited a meadow. It would take me another 15 years—and a career change into landscape design—before I understood what that looked like to others, and why it puzzled some people.

By 2011, 15 years later, the public conversation about the landscape and land care had changed. Native plants, pollinators, and

critiques of conventional lawn care were gaining traction. Books questioned the ecological and cultural dominance of turfgrass.<sup>1</sup> Organic land care products were proliferating. It seemed inevitable, I thought, that homeowners would begin replacing lawns with meadows, shrublands, and more diverse plantings.

Also that year, I changed careers and became a landscape designer. What I learned as I entered the landscape marketplace was that there was interest in change. But implementation was, some might say, complicated.

It would be easy to say people simply prefer neat, orderly landscapes, but that’s not the whole story. Over time, I noticed something deeper in the reactions people had to naturalized spaces.

On one meadow tour I led, several participants refused to walk along a mowed path through tall grasses. “We’ll meet you on the other side,” one said. They were afraid of snakes.

At a homeowners’ association meeting for a meadow project, a man remarked, “This makes me feel like I’m living in the impoverished neighborhood where I grew up.” He described grass growing through broken sidewalks.

Once, while doing maintenance on a field of yellow prairie grass, a passerby paused and asked, “Why does it look so...spike-y?” And then there is the ever-present concern about ticks.

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**Get Ready for the  
Plant Sale & Auction!**

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Membership Dues:

|                                            |                |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------|
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| Senior Family (65+).....                   | \$75           |
| Student (full time with<br>valid ID) ..... | FREE           |
| Horticultural Business<br>Member .....     | \$100 or \$250 |
| Organizations.....                         | \$80           |

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## Leadership Letter

Dear friends,

Spring is my favorite time of year. I love to see the spring ephemerals—wildflowers such as Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*) and Dutchman’s Breeches (*Dicentra cucularia*) that need to bloom and go to seed before the tree canopy closes in and shades them. In the 1970s, scientists proposed the vernal dam hypothesis -that these plants help capture nutrients that might wash away during the spring melt. There is more importance to them than just a pretty flower. See [https://northernwoodlands.org/outside\\_story/article/spring-ephemerals-forests](https://northernwoodlands.org/outside_story/article/spring-ephemerals-forests).

Now is a good time to think about increasing natives and creating small meadow habitats in our yards, and Kathy Connolly will help you do that at our May 28th meeting when she will present “Designing Meadows and Naturalized Plantings for a Human Landscape.” Kathy is such a great speaker, and I always learn something new. Join us in Middletown: we now have a great door prize at every in-person meeting, and we’d love to meet you and talk plants.

Don’t forget about our amazing Plant Sale & Auction on May 15! We need some volunteers in this charity event, where all proceeds go to scholarships for horticulture students. We are also looking for some people to help at our table for Celebrate! West Hartford on June 6 and 7. Let us know if you can help. These events are fun and you get to meet a lot of like-minded people.

Our education committee is planning some great trips and workshops this summer, so keep watch for further details.

Happy spring!  
Jim Sirch

### Thank you to our generous business members and supporters!



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**Mountainview Landscaping LLC**

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**Otter Gardens**





Kathy Connolly

# Designing Meadows and Naturalized Plantings for a Human Landscape

with *Kathy Connolly*

Thursday, May 28 • 7 pm

CNTR, 725 Main Street, Middletown and on Zoom (See map below)

(Members will receive the Zoom link the Sunday before the talk.)

For scheduling reasons, we are holding this talk on the fourth Thursday this month.)

Meadows and other naturalized landscapes are often imagined as capturing nature’s patterns and benefitting local ecology. Yet, to gain acceptance in a human setting, a great deal of planning—and some compromise—may be required. In this discussion, we’ll consider topics such as scale, proximity to visitors, sightlines, pathways, edges, seating, signs, standards of care, the dormant season, and more. We’ll especially talk about the perennially interesting topic of plant heights. This talk explores form and setting, not specific plant selections or layering. Plant lists are included in the handout.

Kathy Connolly is a landscape designer who specializes in naturalized designs, low-impact landscape techniques, and native plants. In addition to her design projects, she gives more than 30 talks and workshops annually. Since 2013, Kathy has published more than 200 articles and newsletters on landscapes, trees, plants, and land care. Kathy has a master’s degree from the Conway Graduate Program in Sustainable Landscape Planning and Design.



## COMING UP IN PERSON AND ON ZOOM:



**JUNE 18 AT 7PM**  
**A Deeper Dive into Ecological Horticulture**  
with *Uli Lorimer*

CNTR • 725 Main Street • Middletown





## CT Hort Plant Sale & Auction Friday, May 15, 2025

Bethany Covenant Church  
785 Mill Street (Rt. 372)  
Berlin, CT

Doors open to the public at 6:00 pm  
\$5 Admission

**CT Hort's annual Plant Sale & Auction returns!** Like years past, it will include an unusual collection of plants and shrubs.

Doors open at 6:00pm with the plant sale and silent auction of perennials, annuals, vegetables, herbs, shrubs and silent auction treasures from local growers, wholesalers, and businesses, and ends with a live auction of some eclectic offerings.

Nancy DuBrule-Clemente will once again curate and serve as one of the auctioneers, alongside Jim Sirch and Kevin Wilcox. Together, they have well over 100 years of experience in the field.



Nancy DuBrule-Clemente

**Nancy DuBrule-Clemente** is the founder of Natureworks Horticultural Services, an organic garden center, landscape design, consultation, installation and maintenance service in Northford that she started in 1983. She is also the author of *Succession of Bloom in the Perennial Garden: A Manual for Garden Designers, Including Shrubs and Vines Often Found in Perennial Gardens* and *A Country Garden for Your Backyard: Projects, Plans & Plantings for a Country Look*



Jim Sirch

**Jim Sirch** has been giving lectures on pollinator gardening and propagating native plants from seed for over 20 years. He is the president of the board of the Connecticut Horticultural Society and founded the Beardsley-Maritime Chapter of FrogWatch, a national citizen science program. A CT Master Gardener, Jim co-founded the Hamden Public Library's Pollinator Seed Library. He is retired from working as Education Coordinator at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.



Kevin Wilcox

**Kevin Wilcox** is CT Hort's resident horticulturist and has more than 30 years of experience in the field. An accomplished and sought-after lecturer, he has presented to plant societies and garden clubs on a wide range of gardening topics as well as specific groups of plants, including rhododendrons, Japanese maples, and conifers. He has served on the CT Hort Board of Directors and is the vice president of the CT Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society.

Proceeds from the evening provide scholarships to Plant Science students at the University of Connecticut (since 1959), and Naugatuck Valley Community College (since 2011). In addition, funds in excess of our scholarship commitments will spill over to CT Hort Cares, our civic grants program.

Please come join us! Questions? Email [auction@cthort.org](mailto:auction@cthort.org).

We are still looking for volunteers to help us at the before and during the sale and auction. [Click here](#) to go to the sign-up sheet!

## Making Nature Readable

from page 1

These responses—fear, discomfort, unfamiliarity, even social unease—often coexist with stated support for environmental goals. People say they want more nature. But when confronted with landscapes they don't immediately understand or even fear, they hesitate or push back.

This is not a contradiction. It is a design problem.

Landscape architect Joan Iverson Nassauer addressed this tension decades ago in her essay "*Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames*."<sup>2</sup> She argued that ecological landscapes are often rejected not because of what they are, but because of how they are perceived. Her concept of "cues to care"—visible signs that a landscape is intentional and maintained—remains one of the most practical frameworks we have.

Put simply: landscapes have an audience. And that audience reads meaning into what it sees.

Environmental psychology helps explain why.

Humans are highly attuned to safety cues. Dense, tall vegetation reduces visibility, which increases uncertainty. There are also cultural signals at play. Lawns, for all their ecological shortcomings, communicate order, investment, and control. Aesthetic expectations matter as well. People tend to prefer landscapes that exhibit coherence, repetition, and recognizable form. Naturalized plantings, especially in early stages or during seasonal transitions, can appear chaotic or unresolved. But most people are accustomed to landscapes that look "finished" immediately and remain relatively consistent.

That dreaded question "*When is it going to look like something?*" reflects a mismatch between ecological processes and human expectations.

Taken together, these responses point to a central constraint: When people hesitate to accept naturalized landscapes, they may not be reacting to nature but to the perceived absence of intention.

This is where design becomes essential. Iverson Nassauer helpfully provided us with the phrase "cues to care" in the 1990s, signs that "someone is home."

If we accept that natural landscapes must function ecologically *and* communicate effectively to human observers, then the task is not simply restoration. It is translation.

The idea that humans prefer environments resembling ancient African savannas where early humans evolved—the so-called "savanna hypothesis"—is often cited in these discussions. While the science behind this idea remains debated, a more practical takeaway is that people tend to favor environments that balance openness (prospect) with places of enclosure (refuge). Naturalized landscapes risk looking like an enclosure.

Confused, but absorbed by this elusive topic, I am always look-

ing for good books that might help me navigate. Luckily, a few have come along that explore human interactions with nature. Their sources come not from landscape architecture, horticulture, or art, but from environmental psychology and environmental neuroscience.

In 2017, "The Nature Fix" by journalist Florence Williams tackled the topic in a lively travelogue of research underway since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by psychologists, physicians, and neurologists around the world. She takes us to Japan and Korea to understand the roots of "forest bathing," a.k.a. *Shinrin-yoku*. We meet a doctor of Forest Medicine who explains the solid clinical results he obtains by exposing patients to forest atmospheres. We meet neuroscientists and psychologists whose work shows how nature exposure (and lack thereof) affects cognition, attention, alertness, mood, and more. She explores research showing the healing value of views of nature from hospital windows and the productivity improvements that occur when nature is visible from the windows of schools and businesses.

In 2024, British paleoecologist Kathy Willis, Ph.D., published "Good Nature: Why Seeing, Smelling, Hearing and Touching Plants is Good for Our Health." Willis cites about 300 studies in her review of topics ranging from the value of window views, our relationship with mysterious fractal patterns in nature, color and scent preferences in flowers, to the sounds of nature including birdsong, water, and rustling leaves. This book leaves the reader with no doubt about the potential value of exposure to nature in many forms.

In 2025, Marc Berman, Ph.D., published "Nature and the Mind: The Science of How Nature Improves Cognitive, Physical, and Social Well-Being." This book is perhaps best described by the author, who says: "As an environmental neuroscientist, I get to study the external environment and the internal biological and psychological human processes in concert to explore important questions." In a narrative that is sometimes personal and sometimes technical, we get a ring-side seat at Berman's environmental neuroscience lab at the University of Chicago.

The upshot, says Berman: "Nature isn't an amenity, it's a necessity."

It may be up to us—designers, horticulturists, home gardeners—to make sure that necessity is met. 🛠️

### Endnotes

- 1 Remember these titles from the 90s and early 00's? Sara Stein's "Noah's Garden," "American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn" by Ted Steinberg, "Lawn Gone" by Pam Penick, and Paul Tukey's "Organic Lawn Care Manual."
- 2 *Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames*, Joan Iverson Nassauer, *Landscape Journal* Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 1995), pp. 161-170 (10 pages) Published By: University of Wisconsin Press

# Save the Date for the CT Hort Symposium

## Sat., October 24 • 9:00-4pm Gardening for All Ages

Marriott Hartford Cromwell

Featuring Keynote Speaker  
**Rebecca McMackin**

Many gardeners work hard to maintain clean, tidy environments ... which is the exact opposite of what wildlife wants, says ecological horticulturist Rebecca McMackin. She shows the beauty of letting your garden run wild, surveying the success she's had increasing biodiversity even in the middle of New York City — and offers tips for cultivating a garden that can be home to birds, bees, butterflies and more.

Get inspired! Watch her Ted Talk: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxgE0q1\\_m6U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxgE0q1_m6U)



Also featuring:



Jen McGuinness



Christine Darnell

More details  
to follow.

Email [office@cthort.org](mailto:office@cthort.org) if you are interested in sponsoring the event.

# HORT HUB is HERE!

- Hort Hub, on CTHort.org, lists all the horticultural happenings in the state and beyond.
- Hort Hub is open to all organizations, clubs, and businesses to post their happenings. It is completely free.
- Listing an event is easy and open to anyone with information to share and takes a few minutes.
- Listings will include, but not be limited to, horticultural societies, garden clubs, land trusts, pollinator pathways, environmental organizations, and other groups interested in promoting horticultural happenings.

## Can you help us to spread the word?

We're looking for Hort Hub Ambassadors to help us spread the word: we want everyone in the state to enjoy and use this incredible resource.

We currently have someone talking to folks in Hartford and Litchfield County. If you have even an hour or two a week to spare, we would love your help to spread the word in the following counties:

- |                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Fairfield County | Middlesex County  |
| New Haven County | New London County |
| Tolland County   | Windham County    |



## Horticultural Happenings & Announcements

Note: Happenings are listed on a space-available basis. To submit an event, send details to [news@cthort.org](mailto:news@cthort.org).

Please format the announcement to resemble the entries below. Deadline for the June issue is May 15.

**Sat., May 2, 11am—Pop-Up Talk: Water, Water, Everywhere, Grace Farms, 365 Lukes Wood Road, New Canaan.** How does our rainwater and snowmelt capture system work to reduce our water usage? Learn about our water conservation efforts and the work of our Nature Initiative to promote awareness and protect local watersheds and discover how the trees in our 77-acre nature preserve contribute to the water cycle. Pop-up talks are led by Grace Farms Education Team members and designed to scale for all ages and levels of experience. These drop-in talks are included with daily registration. [Gracefarms.org](http://Gracefarms.org).

**Through May 10, “Native Gardens: A contemporary comedy about plants, property, and perspective,”** Hartford Stage, 50 Church Street, Hartford. Pablo and Tania are ready to build their dream home—and their dream garden. But when they discover their new neighbors’ flower beds are creeping over the property line, a boundary dispute unearths tensions around differences in race, class, age, gender, and more. You’ll laugh out loud... and maybe recognize a little bit of yourself...as the flower-flinging backyard battle ensues, and Native Gardens digs into identity, entitlement, and the messiness of coexisting. Times and costs vary. Go to <https://www.hartfordstage.org> for ticket information.

**Thurs., May 7, 6 pm-7:30 pm—Bartlett Arboretum & Gardens presents “Turn Your Garden into Habitat with Native Plants,”** 151 Brookdale Road, Stamford. How can our own yards become part of the solution to restoring natural systems? Join Lydia Pan to explore how incorporating native plants into our landscapes can support biodiversity by providing essential food and shelter for wildlife. This presentation will offer guidance on selecting the right plants for the right place, along with key landscape features and management practices that help create a thriving, ecologically rich habitat garden. Public event. Free for Arboretum members, \$10 for non-members. Register: <https://www.bartlettarboretum.org/events/2026/5/7/turn-your-garden-into-habitat-with-native-plants>

**Mon., May 11, 7 pm—The World of Peonies with Dan Furman, co-sponsored by the Garden Club of Avon & Avon Library, Avon Library, 281 Country Club Rd., Avon.** This talk will cover all the basics of identifying, appreciating and growing peonies. Daniel Furman of

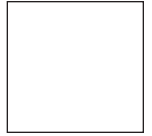
Cricket Hill Garden in Thomaston will dive into the diverse world of peonies. From their roots as medicinal plants in China and Europe, to symbols of wealth and prestige in Imperial China, peonies hold a special place in the hearts of gardeners the world over. The talk will intertwine the rich history of this storied plant along with practical advice on growing great peonies in New England. Free to attend. Register at <https://www.avonctlibrary.info>.

**Tues., May 12, 11 am–noon— Adding Herbs to your Landscape – Cherry Brook Garden Club, Canton Community Center, 40 Dyer Avenue, Canton.** Susan Eisenhandler, Ph.D. will discuss how herbs create a vibrant garden, not only for human beings, but for countless species that make our lives possible. At the same time herbs offer us a host of extras—daily delight of color, fragrance, taste, and touch. Susan is a Certified Advanced Master Gardener, and a member of the CT Master Gardener Association (CMGA), the Rosemary Circle of the Herb Society of America, and the Bristol Garden Club. There is a \$5 guest fee. Event information: 860-352-8398 or [cherrybrookgardenclub@gmail.com](mailto:cherrybrookgardenclub@gmail.com).

**Tues., May 26, 10 am–12:30 pm— ‘All About Houseplants: What to Choose and How to Care for Them’ – Orchard Valley Garden Club, American Legion Hall, 64 Main Street, Southington.** Our members and guests will welcome Dr. Yonghao Li and learn, All About Houseplants: What to Choose and How to Care for Them. Dr. Li runs the Plant Disease Information Office at the CT Agricultural Experiment Station. This office serves all CT private and commercial growers using traditional methods as well as molecular, serological, and biological methods. Dr. Li earned his Ph.D. in Plant Pathology from the University of Arkansas. Suggested donation \$5 for guests. Event information: 860-937-7880

**Thurs., May 28, 9:30 am–Noon— Creative Container Garden Design – Danbury Garden Club, Hatters Park, 7 East Hayestown Road, Danbury.** Danbury Garden Club has invited Kasia Fancher of Shakespeare’s Garden to inspire us with Creative Container Garden Design. All arrangements will be raffled to benefit the scholarship fund. Open to the public with \$10 donation. Event information: 917-576-4509 or [info@danburygardenclub.org](mailto:info@danburygardenclub.org)

Visit [cthort.org](http://cthort.org) for the MOST CURRENT listings and links.



*Dated Material* 🌿 *Please Rush*

### CT Hort Calendar at a Glance

- Tuesday, May 12** – Board of Directors Remote Meeting, 7 pm
- Friday, May 15** – Deadline for the June 2026 *Newsletter*
- Thurs., May 28** – Speaker presentation: *Designing Meadows and Naturalized Plantings for a Human Landscape* with Kathy Connolly, 7 pm, live at CNTR, 725 Main Street, Middletown, on Zoom

Go to [CTHort.org](http://CTHort.org) for information on these and all other meetings and programs.

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## Adopt-a-Garden Program

We invite passionate individuals to join us at **Annie Fisher Montessori Magnet School** or **Capital Preparatory Magnet School in Hartford** through the **Adopt-a-Garden program!**

Gardeners of all levels wanted! By volunteering, you'll have the opportunity to connect with students and help them understand where their food comes from, enjoy the outdoors, and contribute to sustainable practices that benefit everyone.

The school gardens are used by the elementary age students, grades 1-3 at Annie Fisher and grades 2-5 at Capital Preparatory.

Volunteer times to work with the students and teachers will be during school hours and requires less than an hour a week.

You will start by working with an existing garden volunteer at each school. Weekend help (no students will be there) is also needed for weeding and watering. Capital Preparatory has a summer term in July and August during which there would be opportunities to work with students and/or garden maintenance as well.

Interested individuals can contact Val Bryan ([vjbryan@att.net](mailto:vjbryan@att.net)) for Annie Fisher Montessori School or Alice Gold ([alicergold@gmail.com](mailto:alicergold@gmail.com)) for Capital Prep School.

