Wild for Portage Pollinators
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I'm sure it's hard for you to think of beautiful Portage County as you look out over our post- winter countryside but know that as sure as we have four seasons in any given day that spring flowers will eventually emerge. I am always thrilled when I see the first crocus or tulip break through the recently frozen ground because I know that summer is just around the corner.

Another sure sign of spring is the buzzing sound of bees. Did you know Ohio has over 400 native bees that help pollinate our crops, not just the European honeybee? There aren't very many flowers in bloom at this time, making early flowering trees like our native silver maples and red maples important nectar sources. Dandelions can also be an important nectar source for pollinators. Some may find these yellow lawn invaders offensive but let's stop a minute and think about those little bundles of sunshine before you go on a mission to eradicate them.. Dandelions are important to bees and provide a great source of nectar to help bees survive until summer flowers kick into gear. For those that cannot tolerate those precious little dandelions in your yard, a good compromise could be letting them grow at least into June before mowing them down. May to June is when you'll begin to take notice of our pollinators hard at work. Many of Ohio's flowers will spring into bloom giving the bees more variety of nectar to feed on. A great tool to learn what is blooming at any specific time is the Phenology Calendar through OSU, learn more at https://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/gdd/.

Beyond just bees, Pollinators is a term used to describe many of our flying friends; Birds, bees, flies, moths and my favorite; butterflies. Some of the earliest butterflies you'll see in Portage County are the Great Spangled Fritillary and the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail.

The Fritillary is an orange speckled butterfly often confused with the Monarch when seen from a distance. But it's very different. Fritillaries are found in all 88 counties in Ohio and are active from June to September. When out hiking you are most likely to find them at woodland edges, in open fields or if you plant several native flowers, they will come to you. The Eastern Tiger Swallowtails soar from the tops of the trees. Its brilliant yellow color makes it easy to identify but it's rare to find their eggs on leaves or even their small green caterpillars since they munch the leaves at the top of trees like wild cherry, willow and lilac.

There are several kinds of butterflies native to Ohio. The most commonly seen in our region are the Viceroy, Swallowtail, Monarch, and the Painted Lady butterfly. Each one has different behaviors and host plants where they prefer to lay their eggs. While the staggering 80% decrease of the monarch population over the last 20 years is becoming more known, Monarchs are not the only insect seeing such dramatic population declines. New research is estimating a 40% decline in insects in North America, a critical piece of the food web that influences all other species on Earth. Insect and pollinator declines are caused by several different reasons, but one of the closest to home is the overuse of pesticides. Plants sprayed with certain chemicals (even some organic pesticides) are poisonous to our pollinators when they land there to dine on the nectar or lay their eggs. Some pesticides can impact pollinators by direct contact, but others can be transported through various plant tissues or pollen to influence them. When larva hatches from their eggs they begin eating the plant they hatched on. And much like Eric Carle tells it in his children's book, they are very hungry caterpillars. If the larva dies; there are no

butterflies. It's that devastating. Bees carry the poisoned pollen back to the hive for them all to eat with terrible results. Responsible pesticide use is a critical piece to saving our pollinators. OSU Extension and its master gardener volunteers are happy to help diagnose any pest and disease issues you have around your home and offer researched based methods to deal with them.

Not a lot is known about where butterflies go when the weather turns cold. We know the famous discovery about the Monarchs making the magical journey to Mexico to overwinter but what do the others do? Recently it was discovered that the small Painted Lady butterfly goes on the furthest know migration; even further than the Monarch. Their fascinating journey is depicted in the PBS special, "Sex, Lies and Butterflies". Scientists have also enlisted the help of citizen scientists to watch, learn and report the bees and butterflies that they see. This research helps find the answers to problems our pollinators face. Some butterflies die at the end of the season but not before depositing eggs or young larva into the bark or dried leaves of trees to sleep until spring arrives.

Plant pollen and nectar-rich plants that provide blooms from early spring to late fall to bring pollinators to your yard. Native plants will do the best without a lot of care. Add shelter to your pollinator garden and shallow puddle areas. Many pollinators and other beneficial insects overwinter under leaves and dead plant material. Considering leaving dead seed heads for the birds and leave plant material in place over the winter. This provides the habitat they need to survive our cold winters. In the spring, you can simply clean things up that you normally would.

Portage County is a great place to admire natural beauty. The bike path winding through the county is home to many native plants that provide a feast for our local pollinators. You can also take the "Wild Hikes Challenge" offered by Portage Parks District. This year, the theme is, "Year of the Pollinators". Your hikes are sure to be full of pollinator activity if you go on sunny, warmer days. Butterflies tend to rest when it's cloudy or rainy.

The Monarch numbers coming out of Mexico this year are up and that is all thanks to the efforts of you. Whatever steps you take to help conserve our pollinators; know that every small effort makes a difference. Some solutions are simple while others take a lot of conscious effort. We have a long way to go with making positive changes in our environment, but I know that together we can be the change. See you on the trails!

Resources; https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/ENT-47
https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/2/11/18220082/insects-extinction-bological-conservation