

## **How to start a native plant propagation and education program with volunteers during a world-wide pandemic**

In 2019, Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Middlesex County volunteers and staff started a native plant propagation nursery and education program. The purpose is to (1) increase the biodiversity of built landscapes in Central New Jersey, (2) donate plants to community projects and improve their maintenance, (3) install native garden demonstrations for suburban/urban yards.

In 2020, per university mandate, no in-person volunteer activities were allowed due to Covid-19. We had to quickly adapt to sustain this volunteer project. Extension staff focused on installing nursery beds, fencing, and irrigation and established a protocol for at home volunteer activities. Over 30 volunteers were trained virtually on native plant ecology, seed sowing, transplanting, and maintenance. Fact sheets and supplies were provided. Native plants can easily be cared for outside making at home care easy for volunteers.

Despite the quarantine, the project has been a success. In 2021, 9,500 native plants (46 species) were grown from seed collected by volunteers. A protocol was established for conducting socially distant online sales allowing consumers to pick up pre-packaged garden packs at a drive-by pickup day- <https://go.rutgers.edu/nativefallsale>. 2,400 plants were sold. Three public webinars (480 participants) were conducted on propagating native seeds, starting native gardens, and sustainable land care for watershed protection. 400 plants were donated to four community projects including a rain garden, pollinator garden, and a meadow restoration.

This project demonstrates the ability of Extension to quickly adapt to changing circumstances while filling an important niche in providing public education and local access to native plants.

### **Michele Bakacs**

Michele joined Rutgers Cooperative Extension in 2009 as a County Agent/Associate Professor for Middlesex and Union Counties. She has more than 22 years of experience in natural resource management and focuses on invasive species control and native plants, sustainable land care, and water quality protection. Michele's clientele includes landscapers, municipal employees, urban gardeners, and watershed groups. Part of Michele's work focuses on teaching invasive species ID/ control and eradicating invasives from gardens and forest ecosystems while promoting increased use of native plants. Michele also works on citizen science efforts in the urban watersheds of central New Jersey helping reduce water and soil contamination. Along with local partners, she developed a pathogen river monitoring and outreach program to let the public know about the safety of water recreation activities. Michele coordinates the Environmental Stewards volunteer program in Middlesex and Union Counties, which enables volunteers to solve environmental problems in their own communities.



**Angela Monaghan**

Angela Monaghan is the Master Gardener Coordinator for Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Middlesex County. She holds a B.S. in Plant Science and a certificate in Economic and Medicinal Plants from Rutgers University. She became passionate about native plants while working at a native plant nursery in South Jersey. There, she learned the importance of incorporating native plant habitats into the landscape to encourage pollinators and beneficial wildlife.

**William T. Hlubik**

William T. Hlubik is a county agent and director for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Middlesex County's EARTH Center in South Brunswick, NJ. He also teaches two undergraduate courses— "How to Start and Manage a Small Farm" and "Applied Analysis of Successful Agricultural Enterprises" --at the Rutgers School of Environmental and Biological Sciences and helped to organize the first Rutgers Agricultural Club for undergraduates in 2015 and serves as the faculty advisor. Bill has more than 26 years of experience providing, advice, mentoring, leadership, and support for new and experienced farmers in New Jersey. His areas of expertise include vegetable and small fruit production as well as agricultural marketing and communication. He created the award-winning "If Plants Could Talk" television series for NJ PBS. Bill has a long and productive history working together with farmers throughout the state and has extensive experience in media outreach through newspaper, radio, and television.