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Saving roadside plants in Pines

Restoration effort started

By **KIRK MOORE** • STAFF WRITER • June 20, 2010

SOUTHAMPTON — Sure, it's been too hot for doing much yard work. But just imagine having to dig in 3,200 plants in a couple of days.

"This is buttonbush, native to the Pinelands. There's Virginia sweetspire. On the back side, we have serviceberry. Then we have false indigo," said Steve Foss, a landscape designer with the state Department of Transportation, as contractors drilled and shoveled planting holes at the intersection of Route 70 and New Road. "All the materials here are drought tolerant."

Roadside maintenance is done differently in the Pine Barrens this spring, with a long-awaited agreement between the state Pinelands Commission, the DOT and county road departments. The new management practices call for limited mowing along roadsides — enough to safely maintain parking shoulders and drivers' sight lines, and preserve more of the rare and endangered plant species that sprout.

"DOT is already interested in reducing its mowing schedule. Last year they delayed mowing on Route 206 and we got to see some beautiful displays of wildflowers and rarities," said Russell Juelg of the nonprofit Pinelands Preservation Alliance, one of many naturalists who advocated more thoughtful road maintenance.

"Mowing is not the only issue," Juelg added. For erosion control, "the standard procedure is to put down some turf-forming seed . . . with lime and fertilizer, and that creates conditions that exclude or set back the natives (plant species) for a long, long time."

Instead of trucking in commercial topsoil, road agencies are to use local Pinelands soil, and avoid using nutrient-rich additives or altering the natural soil acidity. It took some work and funding through the DOT's Good Neighbor program to restore natural conditions at the Southampton site, including tilling as deep as two feet to break up hardpan packed down by cars cutting across one

corner, Foss said.

"We excavated nonnative fill from here to the curb and replaced it with native soil," Foss said.

Along the edge of the highway, low-growing Pennsylvania sedge will keep visibility open, with taller shrubs and finally the serviceberry backing up to the treeline. On open ground, a new Pinelands native seed mix with wildflowers will be used instead of the DOT's standard grass blend, Foss said.

"It's a great thing. A lot of these intersections are forgotten," Foss said. "Incorporating plants that are native to the Pinelands are great for their character and make them good gateways for the region."

Roads are not generally good for nature — ecologists know they bring on roadkill in the short term, and fragmented forests over the long haul. But in the Pinelands, open road edges are also a linear habitat of some hundreds of miles that hosts rare and endangered plants. There could be some 10,000 acres of rare plant habitat along the roads, according to Michael Van Clef, a botanist who has studied the issue for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

Characteristic species include Pine Barrens gentian, an iconic deep-blue flower, and butterfly milkweed, an important food source for migrating monarch butterflies. Pinelands Commission staffer David Kuttner, who helped develop the management plan,

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said the trick is to time mowing so it does not disrupt the plants' life cycles.

The management practice calls for managing roadsides with three zones:

An 8-foot-wide strip adjacent to the pavement that is mowed as needed to maintain a safe space to pull over vehicles, without the danger of hot exhausts setting dry vegetation on fire.

A band from the edge of the roadside strip to the tree line where mowing is done only during the dormant season for plants from December to March. Kuttner said the preference for many species is to delay mowing until March so plants can get through their annual life cycle before disturbance.

A no-mow zone from the edge of tree line into the woods, where workers will only trim overhanging branches.

The DOT is following those guidelines with a pilot project along Route 72 from the Four Mile traffic circle in Burlington County to the Garden State Parkway.

Naturalists and Pinelands commissioners had talked for years about developing a regional management plan for highway agencies, and the concern gained some urgency after several cases when county road department workers unknowingly mowed or spread nonnative topsoil over plant stands. In March 2009, Pinelands botanical artist Robin Jess and other plant specialists pleaded with the commission to do something.

In turn, the commission assigned Kuttner to develop a plan.

"We asked a handful of botanists with extensive experience with Pinelands plants, people like Ted Gordon and Joe Arsenault," Kuttner recalled. "They identified more than 200 sites they knew of . . . and that made me think: If we went out and looked, we'd probably find far more than 200."

The working group met with Pinelands Preservation Alliance workers last September and realized the roadside project had to be even bigger and include county-level Soil Conservation Districts that regulate erosion from road work and construction

projects.

"They want to see any bare soil immediately stabilized. Usually that means putting down cold-season grasses with lime and fertilizer and pesticide," Kuttner said. But creating nonnative turf also changes the conditions that favor native Pinelands species.

Soil officials got on board with the project, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service helped design a Pinelands-specific seed mix for soil stabilization, Kuttner said. By July, a statewide soil committee could approve revisions to the soil conservation manual to put in Pinelands-specific guides.

"It's trying to create soils management . . . and at the same time be consistent with Pinelands ecology," Kuttner said.

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