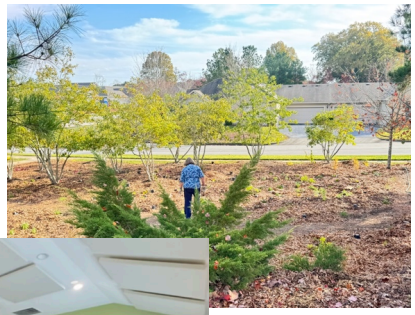
Impact Project Report

Master Naturalists help HOA community expand habitat areas

Issue

Across North Carolina, rapid development has replaced natural habitats with manicured, low-diversity landscapes that harm pollinators and wildlife. Many neighborhoods—often governed by Homeowners Associations (HOAs)—prioritize uniform aesthetics over ecological health. HOA plant lists frequently recommend non-native or even invasive species, crowding out the native plants that sustain North Carolina's rich biodiversity.





Residents admiring newly planted area (above). Miller and Staats leading a training session (left)

Project

Master Naturalist volunteers Jennifer Miller and Janet Staats saw an opportunity to restore native habitats and reestablish pollinator corridors within a Chapel Hill HOA community. In a grassroots collaboration, the volunteers partnered with two neighborhood ambassadors, Orange County Cooperative Extension, the New Hope Bird Alliance Bird Friendly Habitat Committee, and the Carolinas Butterfly Monitoring Program to assess neighborhood landscapes and recommend improvements for creating ecological gardens.

Master Naturalists trained residents to use citizen-science tools like iNaturalist and Merlin to document local species before and after habitat improvements. They provided education on native plants, soil testing, and ecological gardening practices—guiding the community through planning, planting, and maintenance of the new garden.

The neighborhood ambassadors leveraged this collective knowledge and support to secure a $2,500 HOA grant, funding the creation of a 5,000-square-foot community pollinator garden—the first of four planned ecological gardens within the community.

Students

This project is the work of Jennifer Miller and Janet Staats

Impact Projects

Beyond classwork, a key feature of the Master Naturalist Volunteer program is the Impact Projects students develop. These projects integrate course concepts and benefit a Partner Organization.

Highlights

Partner Organizations

New Hope Bird Alliance
Carolinas Butterfly Monitoring Program

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