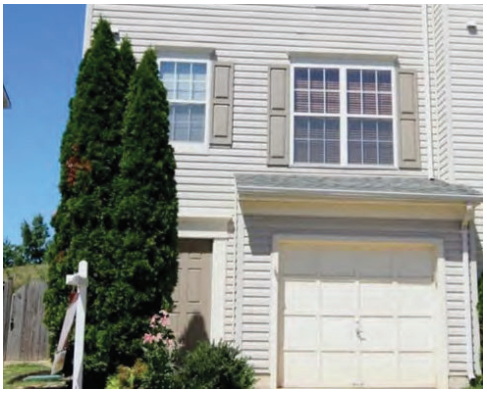
From Bagworms to Butterflies: My Garden's Glow-Up

Allisyn Jones, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener Intern

Buying my first home felt like a rite of passage. When I finally held the keys to my townhouse, I couldn't wait to make it my own—especially the forlorn patch of green out front. Calling it a "garden" would've been generous. It featured a towering arborvitae riddled with bagworms, a few builder-grade shrubs, some hostas and oriental lilies, and a very sad, diseased azalea. I never imagined I'd transform that space into the pollinator paradise it is today.



How the yard started in 2014
All photos courtesy of Allisyn Jones

This is the story of how I turned a neglected yard into a nearly year-round buffet for bees, butterflies, and birds—with a few gardening missteps (and laughs) along the way.

The arborvitae swayed like an unsteady baby just learning to walk. Bagworms treated it like an all-you-can-eat buffet, and birds gave it the cold shoulder. It hogged prime root real estate, so I had it removed and the stump ground down. Once the soil settled, I planted a few budget-friendly finds from the box store—mostly the under-a-dollar misfits. I leaned on the plants I remembered from gardening with my mom, hoping nostalgia would bloom into something beautiful.



Peonies that brought me joy when my front looked like a disaster after the renters

The backyard offered a blank canvas. It was mostly sunny with a few soggy spots—classic Virginia clay. But when I dug in and found worms—nature's soil aerators—I knew I had a good start. I discovered Bumper Crop at a local nursery, and it changed everything. That stuff worked wonders on my rock-hard soil.

Inspired by my late aunt's beachside hydrangeas, I planted one in the front yard. Rookie mistake. It baked in the sun like a biscuit on a dashboard. I didn't think to move it, and it never stood a chance. Lesson learned: right plant, right place.

In 2016, I covered a hidden back corner with periwinkle, encouraged by a nursery's promise of "easy ground cover with charming blue blooms." Well, it took off like kudzu on caffeine because it's an invasive plant (unbeknownst to me at the time). I'm still pulling it out every week.



Front yard after the renters

Life threw me a curveball, and I rented out the house for two years. I didn't expect the tenants to garden, but wow—they really didn't. Grass choked out most of my perennials. But when I returned, my peonies had survived. Their blooms felt like a welcome-home hug.



Swamp rose-mallow

By then, my daughter had discovered the joy of digging in the dirt. Around the same time, I found the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, and my mission became clear: turn our yard into a pollinator sanctuary.

In spring 2022, we planted our first swamp milkweed. That led to our first trip to a native plant nursery. I started small—yarrow, aster, swamp rose hibiscus mingled with my hollyhocks. For the shady spots, I went full Jurassic with ostrich and dixie wood ferns. As the swamp milkweed became established, so did our insect visitors. We even spotted American goldfinches, drawn in by the wildflowers we planted from seed.

The more we added to our garden, the more volunteers showed up. From nasturtium to another type of peony, I suspect the squirrels helped "plant" a few things. I usually curse them, but maybe they saw our yard as a good place to stash treasures.

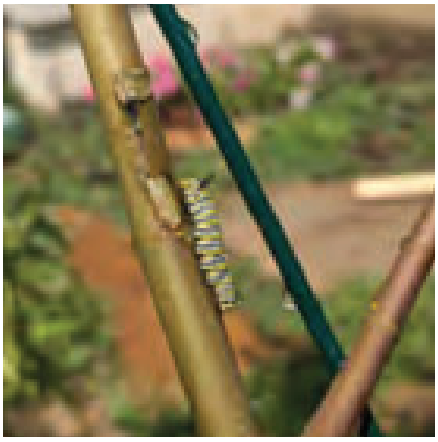


Welcomed pollinators in the hollyhocks

In 2023, we had our first caterpillars, and my daughter was over the moon. It was like a living science experiment. We counted 15 on just three milkweed plants. Ladybugs feasted on aphids, assassin bugs patrolled the leaves (though we were a bit heartbroken to see one take down a caterpillar), and hummingbirds zipped through the yard. I had to start using an AI lens just to identify all the bees, wasps, and butterflies we were seeing. I'd heard the phrase "plant it and they will come," but I never imagined we'd create such a thriving ecosystem.

Eventually, I had to say goodbye to the hollyhocks after a stubborn burst of rust. They took up a lot of space, so I replaced them with Loudoun County natives: goldenrod, foxglove beardtongue, purple coneflower, sweet joe pye weed, and scarlet bee balm. In the backyard, the ferns thrived, and I added foamflower and turtlehead. In the sunny spots, coneflowers and blazing stars now bloom alongside calla lilies and dianthus.

And that sad little azalea from day one? I moved her to a sunnier spot, and she bloomed like she got a second lease on life.



Monarch caterpillar



Finally a monarch



Happy coneflowers = happy bees

Now, our garden buzzes with life. It's not perfect—there's always weeding, learning, and the occasional plant rebellion—but it's ours. And every bloom, bee, and butterfly reminds me that even the saddest yard can become a sanctuary—with a little compost, a lot of love, and maybe a few gardening gloves that mysteriously disappear.

Thinking About Helping Pollinators? Start With Local Plants.

If you're thinking about helping pollinators, the best thing you can do is plant native species. Native plants provide the nectar, pollen, and habitat that local pollinators evolved to depend on. Over 80 percent of flowering plants rely on pollinators to reproduce—and many of those pollinators are in decline due to habitat loss, pesticides, and climate change.

Even a few native plants in a container garden or small yard can make a difference. Start with just one or two species like milkweed, coneflower, or goldenrod, and you'll be amazed at who shows up. Trust me—plant it, and they really will come.

- Creating Inviting Habitats
- Virginia Invasive Plant List
- Plant Virginia Natives
- Pollinators in the Out-of-Play Areas of Virginia Golf Courses