

Circle Oasis

Building an urban eco-landscape at WheatonArts will have lasting benefits for community and environment.

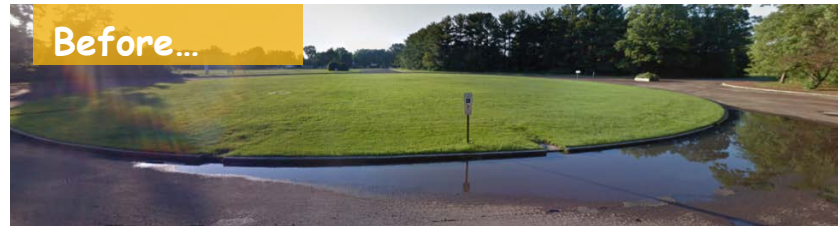
By Karla Rossini, Executive Director, CU Maurice River

CU Maurice River and Rutgers University's Cooperative Extension Service's Water Resources Program have recently completed a large green infrastructure installation in partnership with WheatonArts. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Delaware River Watershed Conservation Grant Program sponsored this project, called *Implementing Green Infrastructure to Protect the Wild and Scenic Maurice River*. The revitalization of the WheatonArts Entrance Circle was the biggest of the four installations associated with the overall project. The project aims to protect clean and plentiful water supplies for human use, and to conserve wildlife habitat integrity. It was fueled by the dedication of volunteer stewards who are making a difference for a healthier tomorrow, by acting collectively today.

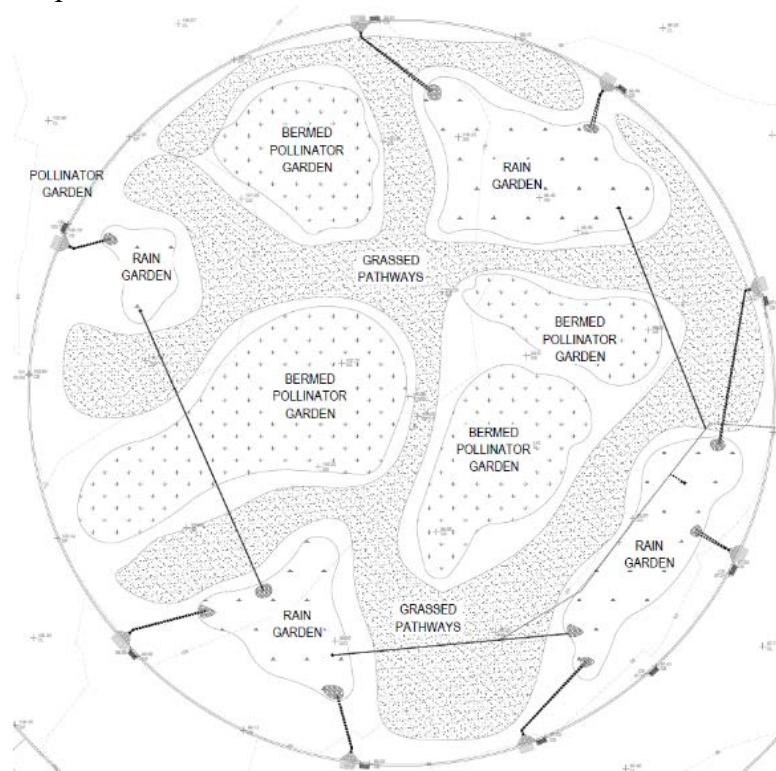
WheatonArts is an anchor cultural destination located in Millville, New Jersey. It is open to the public and attracts over 60,000 visitors per year. There are many offerings to take advantage of including museum and gallery exhibits, hands-on educational opportunities for children and adults, interpretive artist demonstrations, special events for the community, and so much more. The facility is home to the Museum of American Glass, Down Jersey Folklife Center, and a dynamic artist community. This non-profit organization's mission is to engage artists and audiences in an evolving exploration of creativity.

Aspiring to participate as environmental stewards of the community, state, and globe, the *WheatonGreen* initiative was established to demonstrate the organization's commitment to sustainability. After WheatonArts experienced flooding at their entrance gate, they made improvements to the facility's drainage system. Then they came to CU Maurice River seeking green-minded solutions that would work in tandem with their improvements. Being longtime partners with Rutgers Water Resource Program, CU suggested incorporating rain gardens into the land management practices used within entrance circle. At that time, the area was being managed as 36,000 square feet of sterile lawn. By installing rain gardens instead, the remainder of the

stormwater could be redirected away from the entrance and back down to the aquifer.



Outmoded land management practices are exacerbating the effects that overconsumption of freshwater is having on the Maurice River's watershed health. Installing an extensive raingarden system addresses the flooding issue, protects surface water resources from contamination, and promotes the recharge of southern New Jersey's drinking water supply: the Kirkwood-Cohansey Aquifer. At the end of 2018, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation recognized the environmental conservation potential of the overall project and awarded CU Maurice River with funding to complete it.



By the end of 2020, the three partnering organizations were collaborating on the development of a garden lay-out that would not only help resolve water management issues but also compliment the facility's aesthetics. In January 2021, the WheatonArts Facilities Committee approved Rutgers' concept design. It featured four interconnected rain gardens and three large upland pollinator areas. Once installed, it would facilitate the recharge of 891,000 gallons of water per year into the aquifer. The

system would also remove a combined 120 pounds of contaminants from waterways, while the native plants support the biodiversity of *Down Jersey*. Upon approval, Rutgers then assembled their team of engineers and landscape designers to draw up the final plans for installation.

Meanwhile, CU Maurice River began engaging the community with the project's goals and involving them in this hands-on learning experience. A kick-off event was held in February. By this time, the CU Maurice River and WheatonArts' communities had been hearing about the project for quite some time. They were ready and raring to get started. Nearly 50 people attended a germination session and volunteered to foster plants from seed for the gardens. The workshop introduced the participants to "blue-minded" water management practices, ecological benefits of native plants in landscaping, unique qualities of the featured flower species, and suggestions for plant care.



Picture shared to Facebook group by Adaria Armstrong.
Trays fostered by the Bridgeton Public Library

Over the next two months, these Eco-stewards shared their experiences on a Facebook page, called Circle Pollinator Project. There they shared the excitement of spotting the first sprouts poking through the soil (well, except for those who were still waiting in nervous expectancy). They also shared growing pains and "coming of age moments," like when crowded trays needed to be thinned out. One participant shared her curious cat checking out, or even eating, the seeds. Another sent an S.O.S. message when ants raided the cells of her trays. The group page was consistently active with updates, inquiries, stories, doubts, and suggestions. In the midst of the deep dark winter, those *little-sprouts-that-could* opened their first set of leaves and inspired

hope in anticipation for the coming of spring – and warmer days. Together this group of eco-stewards raised over 2,100 plants.



Drone picture captured by CU Maurice River volunteer Tom McKee.



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Installation finally started on Monday, April 26th, and finished on Friday, April 30th. Over this five-day period 90+ volunteers came to revitalize the circle into a vibrant, welcoming space. Novice and experienced gardeners alike turned out to dig trenches, remove extant pipes, spread mulch, connect rain gardens with underground pipes, fill inlets with rock, and move mountains, upon mountains, upon mountains of soil. Many of them expressed excitement that the lawn area would finally be transformed into

an eco-friendly landscape. The space was naturalized into an urban garden, that functions as an oasis for pollinators, beneficial insects, and birds. While working, volunteers imagined how the space would welcome many visitors to *Down Jersey*. Would it serve as an outdoor classroom? Could it potentially house outdoor glass art exhibits? How many soirées could the garden host in the future? Many volunteers participated because they felt drawn to a project that would make a difference for WheatonArts, an organization that celebrates the area's history and preserves its glass making tradition.

In addition to the rocking volunteer team, local companies Stanker & Galetto and Northeast Precast donated two backhoes to the successful and timely completion of the project. Operated by skilled drivers, the backhoes dug out rain gardens and helped move heavy materials - while also inspiring some of the youngest members of the volunteer team. They carved out valleys and built-up hills in record time. Each rain garden is between two and three feet deep with areas ranging between 1,500 – 2,120 square feet. The three large upland pollinator gardens were built using repurposed soil from the excavation of the rain gardens. They stand one and four feet in height.

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*On Saturday, May 1st volunteers showed up for one last hurrah.
Photo by Michael Biddinger.*

The Community Planting Day! Experienced gardeners helped the novice. Adults helped children, and children helped adults. It was a day filled with heartwarming moments framed by a mutual sense of community. Four thousand plant plugs were purchased from New Moon Nursery, a wholesale native plant resource in Woodstown. In addition, CU Maurice River members Susan McKenna, Carol and Bob Marceluk donated a total of one thousand plants from their backyard habitats. Along with the 2,100 plants fostered from seed by volunteers, on that day approximately 7,000 native food and host plants were put in the ground by families, local community members, and visitors to southern New Jersey.

Now CU Maurice River, WheatonArts, Rutgers, donors, and volunteers are looking forward to watching the gardens grow and the water percolate as the installation works to protect drinking water supplies and wildlife habitats for future generations. We invite you to visit the WheatonArts entrance circle and explore this urban oasis. For more information, please visit www.CUMauriceRiver.org or contact Karla.Rossini@CUMauriceRiver.org. For more information about WheatonArts visit www.wheatonarts.org.



Photo by Michael Biddinger.