

MiSustainable Holland

About this series

The MiSustainable Holland column is a collection of community voices sharing updates about local sustainability initiatives.

This Week's Sustainability Framework Theme:

Environmental Awareness/Action: Environmental education and integrating environmental practices into our planning will change negative outcomes of the past and improve our future.

Rethinking traditional landscaping boosts a sustainable future

By Tanner Bricker
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Recent years have seen a shift to break the mold of maintaining vast acreages of traditional monoculture lawns by exploring more sustainable alternatives. ODC Network has spent the last two decades doing exactly that, being advocates and facilitators of converting lawns and lesser-used spaces into vibrant native plant communities.

These ecological restoration efforts help reduce maintenance such as frequent mowing, irrigation, and fertilization. They also support local wildlife, improve air and soil quality, and create meaningful spaces for outdoor education and recreation.

Beyond restoring land on ODC Network-owned properties, the ODC Conservation Services division over the past decade has successfully restored more than 250 acres of land into native plant communities for local businesses, municipalities, and landowners.

A notable partner in these efforts over the past few years is Holland Board of Public Works, which has collaborated to restore and manage nearly 20 acres of native landscape across its facilities. These restored communities not only help reduce mowing, conserve water, and provide wildlife habitat, but also serve as great example sites of eco-friendly landscaping for the public to view.

Visitors to Holland Energy Park off Chicago Drive can witness a stunning example of a biodiverse shortgrass prairie. Yellow coneflower, bergamot, and butterfly milkweed reach above the little bluestem and sideoats grama to put on dazzling displays of color throughout the summer months. Bird watchers, botany enthusiasts, and casual hikers alike will find much to appreciate along the trail network.

The entrance into Tunnel Park turns heads as the Water Filtration Plant directly to the east puts on an impressive summer display of wildflowers, including hoary vervain, black-eyed susan, yarrow, and purple coneflower to name a few.

A walk by the newly planted Service Center on Hastings Avenue reveals a kaleidoscope of flowers alive with thousands of pollinators. Beyond the aesthetic value of these habitats, they provide critical shelter and food sources for native pollinators. A carefully curated seed mix yields diverse blooms throughout the entire growing season.

The best part is that these landscape transformations are valuable at any scale. Consider that annoying-to-mow pocket of constantly saturated lawn; it could become a diverse rain garden with just a little planning and elbow grease. Or that sun-scorched patch of rarely used lawn can be a potential micro-prairie patiently waiting to provide nectar to a host of pollinators.

Although the restoration process requires hard work, the connection to nature that a property owner will feel is always worth the effort. It's a reminder that we are interconnected with nature and that we all have a responsibility to do our part. Hopefully, this inspires property owners to rethink what can be done on their own property and motivates them to support our local ecosystems in meaningful ways.

■ *Tanner Bricker is the conservation services director for ODC Network.*