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No-Mow Zones: A Success Story

By John Rhodes, Chair of the Village of Mount Kisco, NY, Conservation Advisory Council & Member of NYSACC Board of Directors

Mount Kisco, NY, is a beautiful Hudson Valley community, with streams, ponds, trails, and thousands of healthy trees. For many years, the village carefully mowed along every stream bank and shoreline, and then puzzled over increasing erosion, silting, and related problems.



Before and After, No-Mow Zones in Leonard Park, Mount Kisco, New York

Local environmentalists had been planting trees and shrubs in the town's riparian zones for years, but progress was limited due to the practice of close-mowing park grounds, and a general lack of understanding of the many benefits of No-Mow zones. Brendan Murphy, now Director of Stewardship for the Westchester Land Trust was particularly helpful in our educational and planting efforts in his former role as Forester for the Watershed Agricultural Council. According to Brendan, "No-mow zones not only protect water and help wildlife, they even save money." This last point, the potential reduction of landscaping costs, resonated strongly with cost-conscious local politicians, and we were making some progress in reforming village land use policies when an unfortunate incident actually helped us to turn the tide.



Around two years ago, miscommunication within our village government led to the removal of virtually all plantings along Wallace Pond and the nearby brook, resulting in even greater erosion and silting. The CAC and supporters were able to use this unfortunate event to focus public attention on the crisis at hand and the need for a new approach. Our efforts, though strongly supported by Village Trustee Peter Grunthal, our Village Planner Jan Johansen, and other like-minded community leaders, stalled for more than a year until, with the election of a new Mayor, we were finally able to establish No-Mow zones along all Village-owned pond and stream banks.

According to Mayor Gina Picinich, “We are fortunate that our Conservation Advisory Council has lead the effort to implement No-Mow Zones in Mount Kisco. Working in cooperation with our Department of Public Works, we now have a broad natural border around the waterways in the Village. One positive outcome has been a reduction of bank erosion. That is particularly important for the healthy flow of the Branch Brook, which can overflow during heavy rains. Other benefits include the beauty of the wildflowers and the habitat created for pollinators.”

Jim Gmelin, Chairman of our Tree Preservation Board and long time CAC member, led our multi-year effort to establish No-Mow Zones in Mount Kisco, and the extraordinary results have been particularly gratifying to him and the community at large. “The profusion of wildflowers growing in the zones, including asters, goldenrod, jewelweed, and milkweed is testimony that the project is working. These plants have also attracted many butterflies, bees, and other beneficial insects. This, in turn, has brought back birds that need insects to supplement their diet of seeds.”

Another major benefit of our No-Mow zones has been the reduction in the Canada Goose population. Smooth banks and well-mown lawns had made our ponds and stream banks a major attraction for flocks of these beautiful but bothersome birds, and their prodigious droppings had created a hazard, making some areas virtually impassable for residents—as well as encouraging algae growth. We had heard that Canada Geese avoid overgrown banks, both due to an instinctive fear that predators might be lurking there, and because they dislike waddling through dense, rough foliage. As our No-Mow zones thrived, the geese increasingly moved elsewhere, leaving the waterside paths safe for walkers.

For those looking to implement similar programs in their towns, helpful support and information is available from NYSDEC, the Cornell Extension, NYSDOT, regional Watershed Councils, and other like-minded organizations.