

The College of Social Work Diversity Garden



What's the Hamilton Diversity Garden?

Traditional lawns usually consist of a monoculture (i.e., one or few species of turf grass) and people apply herbicides, pesticides, and water, and work hard to keep them that way. Because most turf grasses are non-native, they require this extra care and continual management. In sharp contrast, native meadows which combine native grasses and wildflowers constitute diverse, complex, interdependent and resilient ecosystems. Different plants make different contributions to the ecosystem (e.g., blooming at different times, offering different types of pollen, flower structures responsive to different insects). They tend to support each other, both structurally and in the soil microbiome they create. This interdependence helps them retain moisture, survive summer heat, and provide shelter for beneficial insects (including predators that control the population of "bad" bugs). In short, diverse plant communities are more resilient. There's a great parallel with diversity in human communities.

Why a garden?

As a safety precaution, the USC grounds crew removed a large old tree in the front of Hamilton that was starting to deteriorate. Since then, they planted a new tree but it will be many years before it starts to cast a large shadow. So I asked university landscaper Emily Jones for permission to establish a native pollinator garden in that area. She purchased the initial set of perennials (i.e., plants that will return year after year). Since then, Emily and I have added additional perennials from our home collections, including some we grew from seed. You can see that some of the perennials have spread by re-seeding or by rhizomes. By filling in the space between plants, they shade the ground and prevent growth of annual weeds.

What's In the Garden?

We've included only plants native to SC because they are most suited for our heat, humidity, soil type, and local pollinators. The current collection includes Butterfly Weed (the bright orange flower in front), Smooth Aster, Calico Aster, Canadian Goldenrod, Grey Goldenrod, Smooth Penstemon, Obedient Plant, Purple Coneflower, River Oats (native grass), Bushy Bluestem (another native grass), Boneset, Blue Mistflower, and Blueberry shrubs.