



Worcester County Conservation District
Healthy Soils Action Plan Challenge Grant Application

Healthy Soils, Healthy Climate Program

Project Description

Goals and Objectives

Project Goal:

- Mitigate climate change and protect water quality by improving soil health of target agricultural, forested, and developed landscapes in Worcester County.

Project Objectives:

- Improve soil health and decrease harmful run-off from developed landscapes.
 - Help community members understand more natural ways to enhance lawn health without overfertilizing through soil testing, workshops, and educational materials.
 - Help community members decrease the area of costly high maintenance lawns, through the creation of demonstration areas and by providing access to planting stock for lawn alternatives such as rain gardens and pollinator habitats.
 - Help community members improve lawn health by:
 - introducing deeper rooting turfgrass varieties that will increase carbon storage capacity and reduce nutrient and water use.
 - helping them transition to clover lawns which capture natural nitrogen reducing the need for chemical fertilizer inputs which can pollute local water and ecosystems.
 - increasing the use of resilient grass varieties that prevent weeds to reduce use of harmful chemicals and improve turf grass water efficiency.
 - Help community members understand when aeration is needed and best practices to reduce compaction and improve soil porosity while limiting unnecessary soil disturbance.
 - Help community members apply healthy mowing by increasing lawn length, decreasing frequency, and leaving clippings on the lawn (or mulch mowing) to build natural organic matter.
 - Help community members apply smart watering practices through education and information on timing, frequency, and amounts.
 - Help community members replace areas of their lawn with native trees, shrubs, perennials, and groundcovers, which increase soil carbon storage, water savings, biodiversity, and resilience in their yard ecosystem.
- Restore soil health in degraded areas.



- Help community members replace hardscaping with native flora on residential and communal lands to increase stormwater control and soil carbon capture potential (rain gardens, trees, bioswales, etc.)
- Help community members in new developments measure and improve their soil health through testing and best practices education.
- Improve soil health and decrease run-off from agricultural and forested lands.
 - Help community members develop and implement Conservation Plans, Nutrient Management Plans and Forest management plans.
 - Help community members understand their current soil health and identify best management practices through technical assistance and soil testing.
 - Improve soil management through the utilization of EQIP practices.

Specific areas where this Project will align with or advance the objectives of the HSAP

This project aligns with the following objectives of the Healthy Soils Action Plan:

Promote Soil Health: To support demonstration type projects that document, prioritize, and implement practices aimed at improving soil health and fertility.

Regenerate forests and tree cover on abandoned and degraded lands.

Increase tree cover in highly impervious and urbanized areas to reduce urban heat island effect and improve carbon and water holding capacity.

Regreen under-used or abandoned impervious surfaces and regenerate soil health on already developed lands.

Sustainable Land Management: To encourage innovative approaches to sustainable land management that minimize environmental degradation, enhance biodiversity and/or restore degraded soil health.

- Increase farmer enrollment and participation in existing programs that provide technical assistance, educational opportunities, and material support.
- Reduce economic barriers that make it difficult for farmers to implement healthy soil practices.
- Incentivize integration of trees and other perennial crops into agricultural systems to increase resistance and resilience to more frequent droughts, floods, and extreme weather.

Community Engagement: To foster community involvement and education in sustainable land practices and soil health improvement.

- To enhance soil functions, by increasing perennial, shrub, and tree cover and diversity in recreational and ornamental landscapes (where not precluded by functional requirements).
- Promote protection, management, and restoration strategies that increase biodiversity, ecosystem health, carbon sequestration, and water retention and infiltration on the landscape.



- Promote proactive efforts to enhance soil-based resistance and resilience capacity to climate and natural disturbances in and around developed areas.
- Eliminate technical and knowledge barriers to adoption of practices which increase soil health.
- Increase soil health education and outreach strategies for all professionals that play a role in the creation and maintenance of turf and ornamental landscapes.
- Provide technical and financial support to managers of large and moderate size impervious areas to establish and maintain green infrastructure.

Methodology

The Worcester County Conservation District is seeking a Challenge Grant of \$75,000.00 to implement the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan. The grant will be used to create and implement a Healthy Soils, Healthy Climate program that will become a central part of the District's existing Healthy Soils Initiative. The program will seek to improve soil health practices within the developed, agricultural, and forested landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance and access to materials and resources. A primary focus of the program will be lawns, ornamental landscapes, impervious surfaces, and degraded areas. It will also enable outreach and assistance to farmers and forest landowners. The program will include:

- The development of educational materials on the relationship between healthy soils and a healthy climate. This will include the sites demonstrating soil health practices on lawns, ornamental, and degraded landscapes.
- Training and workshops for homeowners, farmers, forest landowners, environmental professionals and municipalities on healthy soil practices and their relationship to the changing climate.
- Direct technical assistance to homeowners, farmers and forest landowners seeking to implement soil health practices. This will include conservation planning with a focus on improving soil carbon storage and minimizing carbon outputs, soil testing, measurements of soil carbon storage, and the provision of planting stock to improve soil health.
- Increase the utilization of Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) financial assistance for the implementation of conservation practices that improve or protect soil health.
- Collection and sharing of data on program impacts.

WCCD's Soil Health Initiative was begun in 2017 and is supported by district revenue and by grants from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) and the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). Through the initiative the district has provided education and outreach on soil health. We have hired a conservation planner, who works under the direction of the district board and the NRCS District Conservationist. The planner provides technical assistance and conservation planning to landowners and enrolls landowners into the NRCS EQIP and CSP programs. We have created a soil testing service where we facilitate soil testing and provide interpretation of the results. Our annual seedling sale focuses on soil and water conservation issues and provides planting stock that provides



conservation benefits. Through the initiative we have created partnerships with other local organizations focused on conservation.

This on-going program provides the structure that will allow WCCD to successfully implement the Healthy Soils, Healthy Climate program. To ensure success we will use grant funds to hire a program coordinator who will be responsible for developing educational materials, producing workshops, building, and maintaining partnerships, and coordinating outreach. Grant funds will also partially support our existing Conservation Planner position. The Conservation Planner will provide direct technical assistance to landowners and will provide technical expertise for our training and outreach. Our long-established seedling and bulb sale programs will focus on soil health issues and will provide soil conservation planting stock, including materials for planting lawn alternatives, decreasing fertilizer use, creating organic lawns, and stabilizing disturbed soils. We have a large mailing list from years of outreach that allows us access to an engaged audience that will be eager to implement new practices. We currently have 3,550 contacts in our Constant Contact account. This list includes workshop attendees, spring plant and fall bulb sales customers, local working group participants and Envirothon program contacts.

Worcester County Conservation District operates within Worcester County, Massachusetts, an area of 1,579 square miles, which encompasses 60 cities and towns. The county includes five cities: Fitchburg, Gardner, Leominster, Southbridge, and Worcester, and 55 towns. As of the 2020 United States Census, there were 862,911 people and 330,319 households in the county. There are 20 communities which are considered Environmental Justice communities in Worcester County.

Within this area, the community served by WCCD and the nature of their involvement, include:

- Landowners (primarily agricultural, forest and residential properties).
 - Landowners seek technical information on land management issues, laws and regulations, and information on types and sources of assistance. The District office is a resource center offering a variety of pamphlets, fact sheets, posters, and many free resources for the public. Landowners and homeowners participate in our annual seedling sale, fall bulb sale, workshops, soil sampling, and technical assistance services.
- NRCS cooperators.
 - Landowners participating in NRCS programs need assistance with development of farm and conservation plans and assistance with understanding and navigating the federal cost-share process.
- Municipal governments.
 - Local communities need information and technical assistance to deal with agricultural, forestry, or environmental issues related to soils or water quality.
- County residents.
 - County residents need reliable and evidence-based information on environmental issues related to soil health and water quality in order to make informed decisions.
- Schools (teachers and students).
 - Schools, in particular coaches and members of Envirothon teams, seek sources of scientific and technical teaching materials, & access to environmental professionals. Graduating seniors interested in pursuing degrees in



environmental fields seek financial assistance through the district's scholarship program.

- Fall Bulb sale and Spring Seedling sale customers.
 - People participating in our annual sales tend to be those who have an interest in the environment, who take a proactive approach to dealing with these issues, and who are appreciative of education and information. This community is our biggest source of volunteers. Our sales mailing list is a valuable tool for outreach to landowners and residents.
- Non-governmental organizations involved in environmental, conservation or land protection issues.

WCCD, through its operations and its board of supervisors, stays engaged with a variety of organizations involved with agriculture and the environment within the community, including state agencies, non-profits, grassroots groups, and local commissions.

Expected Outcomes and/or deliverables.

- Baseline data through soil testing
- Demonstration sites
- Decreased lawn size
- Decrease of fertilizer use
- Implementation of organic lawn care practices
- Development of educational materials/web site
- Increased planting of native flora and sustainable lawns
- Installation of conservation practices on agricultural and forest land
- Increased knowledge of soil health and its relationship to climate change
- Direct technical assistance to landowners
- Number of soil tests

Budget

WCCD is requesting \$75,000.00 to support our Healthy Soils, Healthy Climate program. The budget covers 16 months (March 2023 through June, 2025). It includes:

- \$16,875 to cover 25% of the Conservation Planner's time.
- \$39,000 for a Program Coordinator working 20-hours per week at \$30/hour.
- \$7,543.13 for payroll taxes on these two employees.
- \$201.87 for postage.
- \$1,500 for workshop expenses. We will hold at least 4 workshops. These funds will cover the cost of venues, food, and speaker fees.
- \$3,380 for soil test equipment, primarily soil test kits, to allow us to offer soil tests at a reasonable fee.
- \$3,000 for travel expenses. This will cover travel for the Conservation Planner and the Program Coordinator for technical assistance visits, workshops, and development of demonstration site, reimbursed at the federal rate.



- \$500 for employee training on topics related to healthy soils.
- \$3,000 for materials, primarily plants. This will allow us to provide inexpensive planting materials for our plant sales and for use in demonstration sites.

Match dollars will be from WCCD income. It includes:

- 10% of our administrator's time for program overview and grant management.
- 10% of the Seedling Sale Coordinator's time to integrate program theme and materials into the annual sale.
- The purchase of plants that support the program's focus.
- Contributions to office expenses, workshop expenses, postage, travel, and training.

In-Kind contributions include the time contributed by our volunteer supervisors and associate supervisors to meetings, program overview, employee training and program outreach, and the time contributed by volunteers for our annual plant sales.

	HSAP	Cash Match	In-Kind Match	Total
Expenses				\$0.00
Payroll (Administrator)		\$3,600.00		\$3,600.00
Payroll (Conservation Planner)	\$16,875.00	\$50,625.00		\$67,500.00
Payroll (Program Coordinator)	\$39,000.00			\$39,000.00
Payroll Taxes	\$7,543.13	\$7,320.38		\$14,863.50
Seedling Coordinator		\$1,250.00		\$1,250.00
employee health insurance				\$0.00
Volunteer time - board			\$12,000.00	\$12,000.00
Volunteer time - seedling sale			\$6,000.00	\$6,000.00
Ins/Workmen's Comp		\$1,781.00		\$1,781.00
Promotional/Website				\$0.00
Office Expenses/		\$500.00		\$500.00
Postage	\$201.87	\$200.00		\$401.87
Meeting Expenses		\$500.00		\$500.00
Workshop Expenses	\$1,500.00			\$1,500.00
Soil Test Equipment ***	\$3,380.00	\$0.00		\$3,380.00
Travel	\$3,000.00	\$1,000.00		\$4,000.00
Training	\$500.00	\$500.00		\$1,000.00
Materials	\$3,000.00	\$0.00		\$3,000.00
Seedling & Bulb Sale Expenses		\$3,000.00		\$3,000.00
Total Expenses	\$75,000.00	\$70,276.38	\$18,000.00	\$145,276.37



Organizational Capacity

The District's Board of Supervisors is comprised of seven voting supervisors and six associate members. They hold the primary responsibility for current and proposed projects. Board members actively engage, meeting monthly to discuss operations, coordinate with staff, and approve District activities. WCCD's effectiveness and successful partnerships can be largely contributed to the dedicated leadership of our Board and expertise of the District Administrator Lisa Trotto who excels in all facets of District Administration, managing the office and programs. Together, WCCD has met the expectations of a district in good standing and looks forward to continued growth.

Additionally, Lisa has played a pivotal role in the creation and success of our fall bulb sale and has been instrumental in the success of our seedling sale. She has adeptly managed grants and contracts, actively represents the District at the MA Envirothon, organizes the Annual Scholarship Program, and organizes impactful outreach and training events.

This proposal, upon funding, will support a portion of our Conservation Planner, Nat Bickford, who will take the lead in implementing initiatives under this grant. In collaboration with NRCS, Nat will offer technical assistance, contribute technical expertise to our training and outreach efforts, and implement conservation practices to protect soil and water resources.

Over the past three years, WCCD met soil testing demands from Worcester County landowners through our Conservation Planner which provided opportunities for technical assistance during sample collection and discussing NRCS programs to address natural resource concerns. They also assist in interpreting results and implementing soil amendments, with 85 tests completed this year.

To enhance the success of the Conservation Planner position, grants funds will also be utilized to hire a Program Coordinator. This role will involve developing educational materials, organizing workshops, establishing, and nurturing partnerships, and overseeing outreach initiatives.

Also, on staff and supported by separate funds, we are fortunate to contract with an experienced Master of Agriculture in Plant Pathology Jem Mix who is in her 2nd year coordinating the annual seedling sale program. Her focus for 2024 will align with the goal of educating landowners for appropriate selections and integrating educational materials on native plantings, invasive plant, and pest species as a responsible step, given its potential impact on the region's ecosystem. This year's initiative will further engage with the Worcester League of Sportsmen's Clubs for a triangular relationship involving native plants, reforestation, and wildlife habitat. The NRCS District Conservationist is furthering this collaboration connecting Sportsmen's Clubs with USDA/NRCS programs as a proactive approach to conservation and community involvement.

List and details of previous achievements. Other information or letters of support that demonstrate the capacity of the organization to successfully implement the project.

The Worcester County Conservation Districts have a history of over eighty years of accomplishments. We have, in the recent past, successfully administered projects and programs



similar to the proposed project.

WCCD has performed outreach on diverse topics. We have a website where we provide information. We annually publish a seedling sale brochure that includes conservation information and includes the same on our website. We have provided numerous workshops on a variety of conservation concerns.

We have worked successfully with employees and contractors. We have had an employee serving as District Administrator who has reported directly to the board of supervisors for over 30 years. We have had a contractor serving as the seedling sale coordinator since 2000.

We have successfully completed numerous grants and contracts over the past few years. Since 2017 we have received and successfully implemented Conservation District grants for the MA EEA. These grants have supported the creation of our Healthy Soils Initiative and partially support our administrator position, our seedling sale and help keep the office open. Since 2020 we have successfully received and implemented Technical Assistance grants from NACD. These grants have allowed us to hire a Conservation Planner who provides direct assistance to county landowners.

Our primary partner is the NRCS, which has a cooperative working agreement with the district. They provide the district with office space and support. They have successfully integrated our Conservation Planner into their system. The planner works partially under the direction of the NRCS District Conservationist, contributing to the NRCS goals for project contracts, conservation planning and project implementation. The District Conservationist attends the WCCD monthly meetings and shares information so we can cooperatively work together toward achieving NRCS and WCCD goals.

Letters of support from project partners were received from the following organizations:

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)
Massachusetts Watershed Coalition
Massachusetts Master Gardeners Association
Manchaug Pond Association
Regional Environmental Council (REC)
Worcester Native Plant Initiative
Worcester Garden Club
Wachusett Garden Club
Holden Conservation Commission
Lady Fern Farm

The letters of support are included in the Appendix.

The Roles of our Partners in the program are detailed below.



Key personnel and their roles in the project

WCCD Board of Supervisors: Will provide project oversight and employee supervision.

District Administrator: Primary point of contact for district. Responsible for management of district budget and work plan.

Program Coordinator: Responsible for project implementation, including reporting and maintaining program records, program outreach, coordination with partners, and program promotion.

Conservation Planner: provides technical assistance and assists with workshops and the development of educational materials.

Project timeline

The time period of the grant program is March 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025.

March 1 – March 31, 2024:

Hire Project Coordinator. Create job description; advertise position; interview candidates; select preferred candidate.

April 1, 2024:

Project Coordinator position filled. The Coordinator will report directly to the WCCD Board of Supervisors and will be responsible for all aspects of the project. The Coordinator will work 20 hours per week for 65 weeks at \$30.00 per hour.

Existing Conservation Planner position will begin contributing to program activities. The planner will provide technical assistance to landowners and contribute to educational materials and workshops. The Planner's salary is \$54,000 per year. The project will provide \$259.62 per week for 65 weeks towards this salary (25%).

April 1 – June 30, 2024

Partnership development. Outreach to existing and potential partners and planning for partner participation. Partner contributions will involve outreach to the general public; hosting workshops; promoting technical assistance; providing technical assistance and materials; implementing demonstration projects (costs: meeting, travel, office supplies, material costs and postage expenses).

Development of soil testing program. Revise existing soil testing program to incorporate carbon measurements. Implement partnership with soil testing services (such as the Comprehensive Assessment of Soil Health (CASH) offered by Cornell University). Acquire necessary materials. Promote program; develop client list; develop system towards maintaining and recording soil test information.

Plan and schedule workshops, targeting homeowners, farmers, forest landowners, municipal



departments and landscape and land management professionals.

Identify and acquire materials needed, such as existing literature that can be provided to local libraries, tools needed for technical assistance, soil sample gathering, and soil evaluation; demonstration materials for workshops, and tools and planting material that can be distributed through the District's seedling and bulb sales.

Begin the development of a roster of contractors who provide services related to improvement of soil health.

July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025

Outreach: promote program activities and the Healthy Soils/Healthy Climate message through the District's web site, Quarterly mailings/newsletters to the District's Constant Contact mailing list; and weekly Facebook/Instagram postings.

Education/Training: Hold four informational meetings at various locations and virtually for homeowners to provide an introduction to soil health principles and lawn strategies and alternatives. Create videos that can be posted to YouTube and shared among our networks.

Hold one training workshop for landscape professionals.

Partner with two local libraries to create space for Healthy soils shelves stocked with books provided by the district.

Soil testing: Conduct four soil tests per month, facilitating the collection and analysis of soil samples and providing the client with assistance interpreting the results and implementing recommended practices. Collect GPS and soil test data.

Demonstration areas: Create two areas demonstrating lawn alternatives and organic lawn management principles. Document creation practices and costs. Develop signage and interpretation.

Seedling and bulb sales: Integrate Healthy Soils/Healthy Climate message and information into sale website, e-mails and brochures; Add native planting materials for lawn alternatives.

NRCS Financial Assistance: Facilitate landowner applications for EQIP practices; Assist in the development of conservation plans; execute contracts with selected participants.

Project evaluation and monitoring

It will be the responsibility of the District's Board of Supervisors to oversee the program implementation and evaluate program performance. The board meets monthly (except July) and the Program Coordinator and the Conservation Planner will provide reports to the board at that time. If performance is not meeting the program goals the board will decide on corrective actions.



Performance metrics

The following metrics will be used to evaluate program effectiveness:

- Number of people receiving informational material.
- Number of people attending workshops and training programs.
- Evaluations from workshop participants.
- Number of people receiving direct technical assistance.
- Number of soil tests performed.
- Number of relevant EQIP contracts executed.
- Planting materials sold/distributed.
- Number of people planting lawn alternatives or applying organic lawn care principals; area impacted; reduction in water use and fertilizers applied.

Reporting

Quarterly reports will be submitted as required. It will be the responsibility of the Project Coordinator to develop the reports. The reports will provide up-to-date program metrics and achievements.

Sustainability Plan

WCCD relies largely on grant funds to support its activities. A grant from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) supports the Conservation Planner Position. Grants from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs supports part of the District Administrator position and the Seedling Sale Coordinator. District revenue from workshops, plant sales and soil testing currently account for 36% of our total budget. If this project is approved, the District Revenue will account for 26% of the total budget.

Grants will continue to be necessary to continue the district functions, including the Healthy Soils/Healthy Climate program. We will, therefore, continue to identify and apply for grants that will allow us to continue our programs.

WCCD will work cooperatively with the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) and other Massachusetts Conservation Districts involved in similar initiatives. The sharing of experiences and information between MACD and the districts will result in more efficient programs, and potentially in cost savings for the individual districts.

The District relies heavily on volunteer contributions. Our Supervisors are all volunteers. Our annual plant sales are dependent on many hours of volunteer contributions to help us pack and distribute plant orders. We rely heavily on the good will and engagement of our customers. They could purchase plants elsewhere for less, but they continue to purchase from us, and for that we are very grateful. We expect that the Healthy Soils/Healthy Climate program will attract additional customers, participants, and supporters, who will find that the message of the program resonates with them and fulfills their desire to make meaningful change and to protect the health of their homes and community, and therefore inspire them to contribute their time and support



for this program. If we are successful in engaging them in this manner, then we are confident that we will find the means to continue the program.

It is also possible that we will be able to increase our revenue through activities related to this program, such as the sale of plant materials and fees for soil testing and workshop participation. Other potential revenue sources, such as the rental of agricultural equipment will be explored.

We will also look at the possibility of combining the District Administrator position and the Project Coordinator into one full-time position that could be supported mostly by District revenues.

Partners and Roles

USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/massachusetts>. NRCS is a long-standing partner of the conservation district. NRCS provides office space for the district administrator and conservation planner, along with access to government computers. The NRCS District Conservationist shares in the supervision of the conservation planner. The District Conservationist attends monthly district meetings and keeps us up to date on government programs and policies. NRCS provides access to financial and technical support for landowners through Farm Bill programs, such as EQIP and CSP.

Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts <https://massacd.org/> MACD represents the 13 Conservation Districts of the Commonwealth. MACD supports member Districts in their efforts to provide education, outreach, technical assistance, and other activities designed to promote sustainable stewardship of natural resources for all members of our communities. MACD strives to do this by increasing public visibility, access to funding, connections to government activities, opportunities for fruitful collaborations, and overall technical and financial capacity. In a successful proposal, MACD plans to assist with the development of educational materials, promotion of events, selection of plant materials, and dissemination of technical information, as well as sharing resources across the state.

Massachusetts Watershed Coalition <https://www.commonwaters.org/about-massachusetts-watershed-coalition> Massachusetts Watershed Coalition works with community partners across Massachusetts. Their mission is the protection and restoration of watershed ecosystems to sustain healthy rivers, streams, lakes, water supplies, terrestrial and aquatic habitats. Formed in 1991, they have three primary goals: 1) Strengthen the work and knowledge of community groups; 2) Raise public awareness of land and water management issues; 3) Improve policies and decisions affecting rivers and their watersheds. In partnering with WCCD for a positive outcome to this proposal, they will assist workshops and share outreach materials, and look forward to advancing healthy soil practices, increasing access to soil tests, and improving environmental quality for Bay State communities.



Massachusetts Master Gardeners Association (MMGA) <https://www.massmastergardeners.org/>
Incorporated as an independent, nonprofit organization since 2008 with more than 7,000 hours of outreach conducted through their network of volunteers at gardening expos, fairs, farmers markets, plant sales, and children's activities to share our love and knowledge of horticulture. Since 2014, members have volunteered more than 23,000 gardening hours at approved garden sites throughout the state to beautify and maintain plantings. These include arboretums, botanical gardens, food pantry gardens, historical gardens, wildlife gardens and sanctuaries, and public/community gardens. Members strive to have a positive impact on their communities, the commonwealth, and the world.

This partnership will include speakers from MMGA's Speaker's Bureau, advising with design and plant selections, and further developing the educational pieces as classes/workshops. In the longer range, together we hope to identify a site for a demonstration project to implement lawn alternatives through both our networks of volunteers.

Manchaug Pond Foundation <https://www.manchaugpond.org/>. Manchaug Pond Foundation Inc. is an all-volunteer, 501 (c)(3) nonprofit public charity dedicated to the welfare and correct use of Manchaug Pond and its watershed. In advocacy, education and action, we work together on issues including water quality, dam and waterlevel, watershed conservation, and safe boating and public access. The foundation would benefit from decreased use of lawn fertilizers in the watershed and would therefore be willing to help with program outreach and training and demonstration events.

Native Plant Trust <https://www.nativeplanttrust.org/about/> Based in Massachusetts, visitors are welcomed to Garden in the Woods, a renowned native plant botanic garden in Framingham. They are among the first organizations worldwide to receive Advanced Conservation Practitioner accreditation by London-based Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), which included an endorsement by an International Advisory Council representing six continents. They have 30 staff members, and 1,500 trained volunteers work throughout New England who monitor, protect, and restore rare and endangered plants, collect and bank seeds for biological diversity, detect and control invasive species, conduct botanical and horticultural research and educate the public, from home gardeners to professional land managers. They operate a native plant nursery at Nasami Farm in western Massachusetts and own six rare plant sanctuaries in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont that are open to the public year-round.

Regional Environmental Council (REC) <https://www.recworchester.org/> A nonprofit food justice organization with a 50-year history of working for environmental sustainability and social justice in Worcester. Their programs include Community and School Gardens (UGROW), Farmers Markets, and YouthGROW, a youth employment and urban agriculture program for Worcester teens. WCCD has been in partnership with REC since 2021 benefitting YouthGROW workshops, program participants, and community gardeners. WCCD has supplied native plants



and technical assistance for REC's pollinator and rain gardens. For this grant initiative, initially WCCD has a commitment from REC to share outreach materials to the general public, and they will host a workshop, furthering our engagement as this program progresses and gains momentum.

Worcester Native Plant Initiative <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1079048142881378/>

Worcester Native Plant Initiative is a grassroots group of citizens committed to a vision for the city of Worcester where all creatures are welcome and people cultivate what belongs in New England. Their aim is to educate about the value of native plants and get native plants into as many landscapes as possible in Worcester. For this partnership they will cross promote materials and workshops.

Worcester Garden Club <https://www.worcestergardenclub.org/> Founded in 1919, and a member of The Garden Club of America and National Garden Clubs, Inc. The WGC's Vision is to inspire people to create gardens for all in the community through education, advocacy, and conservation. Their Mission is to cultivate, steward, and educate for a beautiful and healthy Worcester County and beyond. Their values are Community, Education, Camaraderie, Tradition, Stewardship.

In 2023, WGC partnered with the Worcester Native Plant Initiative and the City of Worcester to create a model urban native plant garden in the brand-new Coal Mine Brook Park. The park borders Coal Mine Brook, a cold-water fishery stream that feeds Lake Quinsigamond. The extensive garden hosts strictly native plantings, most of them raised from seed by the WNPI; WGC is in the process of seeking funding to almost double the size of this garden. In this partnership WCCD hopes to provide additional native plantings and funding, hoping this site will be suitable as a demonstration site. WGC have also hosted programs such as "How to Kill Your Lawn", encouraging folks to convert lawns into native plantings. Club members have introduced the "April is Native Plant Month" resolution to the Massachusetts legislature and succeeded in its passage.

Wachusett Garden Club <https://www.wachusettgardenclub.org/> The Wachusett Garden Club, founded in Princeton in 1986 by a group of friends who shared an interest in learning about and helping each other with gardening, conservation, and horticulture. For this grant initiative WGC will cross promote materials and workshops within the network of members.

Holden Conservation Commission <https://www.holdenma.gov/conservation-commission> The mission of the Holden Conservation Commission is to protect wetlands in town by administering the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act (WPA) and the local wetland bylaw which has been extremely successful in regulating projects and reducing environmental degradation. In addition to conducting public hearings for various projects and monitoring permitted projects, the Commission is in the early stages of implementing the ten-year Town Forest Stewardship Plan. For this initiative, they will cross promote programming throughout



the town of Holden. Together we are looking at the feasibility of a local lawn alternative demonstration site.

Lady Fern Farm <https://ladyfernfarm.com/> Locally based and woman-owned, Lady Fern Farm offers strictly native plants and no cultivars. Many of the plants they grow are on the Massachusetts endangered species list and are hard to find. Owner Nikki Howell has a degree in Sustainable Agriculture and has farmed internationally. She is the owner of Phattoria which develops and builds organic gardens with homeowners, empowering people to grow their own fruits and vegetables. Nikki has years of garden consulting experience and brings the environmentally critical role of native plants to the forefront of Lady Fern Farm. In this partnership they plan to support WCCD by promoting materials and joining WCCD's native plant directory where we will refer Lady Fern Farm to residents looking for native plants.

During the implementation of the program, we also plan to reach out to:

- Town libraries for assistance with outreach and distribution of educational materials.
- Native plant nurseries for technical expertise and sources of planting materials;
- Landscape designers for technical expertise;
- Farmers, forest landowners and homeowners, for implementation of conservation practices and workshop support.

Community engagement

WCCD services a community of engaged homeowners, farmers, forest landowners, conservation organizations and environmental professionals. We keep in contact with this community through our web site, listserv, social media posts, workshops, and annual plant sales. We actively engage the community through volunteer opportunities that support our annual plant sales.

Through the Healthy Soils, Healthy Climate program we will be further engaging this community through partnerships with organizations committed to reaching a wider audience for our soil health message and providing venues for program activities; through on-line and in-person workshops; and through direct technical assistance to landowners.

Risk Assessment for Project, partners, timeline

Risks would include any disruption of working conditions and social interactions, such as what occurred during the Covid pandemic, and disruptions to the federal government, such as a shut-down that closes federal offices and curtails federal services.

Extreme weather events also pose a risk, possibly curtailing travel and disrupting work schedules. They could also negatively impact demonstration sites.



Budget problems could result in some project partners being unable to fully provide their contribution.

The WCCD board will continually monitor the program and our employees. We will be aware of potential risks and will develop mitigation strategies to overcome them. Our employees will be equipped to work remotely. Their work schedules are flexible, which will allow for rescheduling of tasks as needed. We will keep in contact with our partners so that we are aware of any potential problems. We have had an overwhelming response to our request for assistance with this program, so that additional partners are available if any need to drop out.



Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts

319 Littleton Road, Suite 205
Westford, MA 01886

January 29, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
Board of Supervisors
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Challenge Grants Implementing the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan.

MACD represents the 13 Conservation Districts of the Commonwealth. We support our member Districts in their efforts to provide education, outreach, technical assistance, and other activities designed to promote sustainable stewardship of natural resources for all members of our communities. We strive to do this by increasing public visibility, access to funding, connections to government activities, opportunities for fruitful collaborations, and overall technical and financial capacity.

We understand that the WCCD initiative's primary goal is mitigating climate change and protecting water quality by improving soil health within the developed, agricultural, and forested landscape of Worcester County. The program will seek to improve soil health practices within these landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance, and access to materials and resources. One focus of the program will be lawns, ornamental landscapes, and impervious surfaces and degraded areas within the developed landscape.

MACD would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with WCCD on their Community Engagement activities in particular. We can assist with the development of educational materials, promotion of events, selection of plant materials, and dissemination of technical information, as well as sharing resources across the state.

We look forward to further developing our valuable ongoing partnership with WCCD and expanding our collaboration as the program progresses and gains momentum during the upcoming year.

Sincerely,

Michael Leff
MACD Executive Director



Massachusetts Watershed Coalition

PO Box 577, Leominster, MA 01453 978.534.0379 mwc@commonwaters.org

January 28, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
Board of Supervisors
52 Boyden Road,
Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

I am pleased to offer support for the Worcester County Conservation District (WCCD) proposal to the Challenge Grants of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) for implementing the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan.

WCCD programs funded by previous EOEEA grants continue to sustain watershed ecosystems through soil testing for community groups and residents, educational workshops, and supplying native plants along with essential guidance for local pollinator and rain gardens.

This WCCD proposal affords an efficient way to address climate change, water quality and soil health for Worcester County cities and towns. The program will improve conservation in diverse landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance and better access to materials and resources. A primary focus of the program will be lawns, impervious surfaces, and degraded areas of developed landscapes.

Massachusetts Watershed Coalition is interested in partnering with WCCD to assist workshops and share outreach materials. We look forward to advancing healthy soil practices, increasing access to soil tests, and improving environmental quality for Bay State communities.

Sincerely,

Ed Himlan

Ed Himlan
Executive Director



MASSACHUSETTS MASTER GARDENER ASSOCIATION

January 25, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
Board of Supervisors
52 Boyden Road, Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Massachusetts Master Gardeners Association, in Framingham, Massachusetts, is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Challenge Grants Implementing the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan.

This initiative's primary goal is mitigating climate change and protecting water quality by improving soil health within the developed, agricultural, and forested landscape of Worcester County. The program will seek to improve soil health practices within these landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance and access to materials and resources. A primary focus of the program will be lawns, ornamental landscapes and impervious surfaces and degraded areas within the developed landscape.

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is interested in the Community Engagement piece in partnership with this initiative and looks forward to exploring activities such as providing speakers through our Speaker's Bureau, collaborating further on developing educational materials, and assisting in the selection of plant materials furthering our engagement as the program progresses and gains momentum.

We look forward to developing a valuable partnership with WCCD that hopes to continue to build this upcoming year.

Sincerely,

Ann McCartan
President, Massachusetts Master Gardener Association



MANCHAUG POND FOUNDATION

P. O. Box 154
Manchaug, Massachusetts 01526
www.ManchaugPond.org

Board of Directors

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Vice President:
Rae Johnson

Treasurer:
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Rae Johnson
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Joan McCowan
Linda Nunes
Brett Swenson

January 29, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
Board of Supervisors
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

Hello:

RE: Worcester County Conservation District Healthy Soils Action Plan Challenge Grant Application 2024

The Manchaug Pond Foundation is very pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Challenge Grants Implementing the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan.

With this initiative's primary goal of mitigating climate change and protecting water quality by improving soil health within the developed, agricultural, and forested landscape of Worcester County it is a perfect match for our mission and our work in the community and greatly fills a much needed area of concern. Partnerships which seeks to improve soil health practices through education, technical assistance and access to materials and resources are invaluable and will enhance our efforts to address lawns and ornamental landscapes, impervious surfaces and erosion/stormwater runoff within the developed landscape.

Our organization serves to protect and enhance Manchaug Pond, a 380 acre Great Pond, with a watershed spanning the towns of Douglas, Sutton and Oxford. The Community Engagement piece of this initiative allies with our efforts in providing information to property owners, seasonal residents, and the 30 hobby farms in our watershed as to the practices they can employ to protect our water resources and maximize home lawn/landscape, agriculture and forest management goals.

We look forward to developing this valuable partnership with WCCD in promoting the adoption of best management practices which enhance our water quality and maximize our efforts in providing educational information to the Manchaug Pond watershed and beyond as part of the greater Blackstone River system.

Sincerely,

Phyllis M. Charpentier
President



REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

January 23, 2024
Worcester County Conservation District
Board of Supervisors
52 Boyden Road, Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Regional Environmental Council (REC), in Worcester, Massachusetts, is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Challenge Grants Implementing the Commonwealth's Healthy Soils Action Plan.

WCCD programs (supported by its 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 EOEEA grants) have benefited REC offering workshops for our YouthGROW program participants and community gardeners, and supplying native plants and technical assistance for our pollinator and rain gardens.

This initiative's primary goal is mitigating climate change and protect water quality by improving soil health within the developed, agricultural and forested landscape of Worcester County. The program will seek to improve soil health practices within the developed, agricultural and forested landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance and access to materials and resources. A primary focus of the program will be lawns, ornamental landscapes and impervious surfaces and degraded areas within the developed landscape.

REC is interested in the Community Engagement piece in partnership with this initiative and are happy to be a workshop site host and share outreach materials as the first step furthering our engagement as the program progresses and gains momentum. We have developed an increasingly valuable partnership with WCCD that hope to continue to build this upcoming year. REC supports a network of 60+ community and school gardens within the city of Worcester and promoting safe and healthy soil and increasing access to soil tests for the over 2,000 gardeners connected to our network is a priority for our program and organization. We look forward to continuing our organizational partnership with WCCD to support soil and habitat conservation practices in local agriculture.

Sincerely,

Grace Sliwoski Director of Programs

Regional Environmental Council

January 18, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

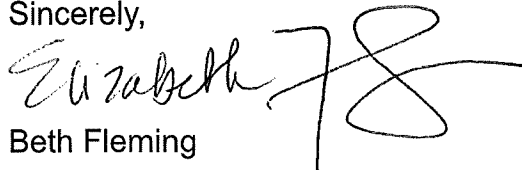
Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Worcester Native Plant Initiative (WNPI) is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Healthy Soil Challenge Initiative Grant for 2024.

Worcester Native Plant Initiative (WNPI) is a grassroots group of citizens committed to a vision for the City of Worcester where all creatures are welcome and people cultivate what belongs in New England. Our aim is to educate about the value of native plants and get native plants into as many landscapes as possible in Worcester.

We have hosted and co-hosted numerous workshops and lectures on topics ranging from supporting native pollinators and rain gardens to winter seed sowing, native shrubs, and beyond. We're thrilled to see that WCCD's EOEEA proposal includes supporting community members in replacing areas of their lawn with ideal trees and shrubs (natives, pollinator-friendly, rain gardens, drought resilient, etc), working with residents to restore soil health in degraded areas, and community programming. Our group would surely benefit from the grant as well. Should WCCD be awarded, we look forward to partnering with them in the promotion of their programming throughout our network of committed community members and beyond.

Sincerely,


Beth Fleming
Worcester Native Plant Initiative



January 27, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Worcester Garden Club, more than 100 years old, is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Healthy Soil Challenge Initiative Grant for 2024.

The **WGC Vision** is to inspire people to create gardens for all in the community through education, advocacy, and conservation.

Our **Mission** is to cultivate, steward, and educate for a beautiful and healthy Worcester County and beyond.

Our **Values** are Community, Education, Camaraderie, Tradition, Stewardship.

With all that in mind, WCCD's EOEEA proposal to increase native and beneficial plants as well as improve lawn care management practices to support healthier soil dovetails beautifully with our mission. Much of our Conservation/Horticulture programming focuses on these very issues. Last year we partnered with the Worcester Native Plant Initiative and the City of Worcester to create a model urban native plant garden in the brand-new Coal Mine Brook Park. The park borders Coal Mine Brook, a coldwater fishery stream that feeds Lake Quinsigamond. The extensive garden hosts strictly native plantings, most of them raised from seed by the WNPI; we are in the process of seeking funding to almost double the size of this garden. We have also hosted programs such as "How to Kill Your Lawn", encouraging folks to convert lawns into native plantings. Club members have introduced the "April is Native Plant Month" resolution to the Massachusetts legislature and succeeded in its passage.

The Worcester Garden Club urges EOEEA's support for this impressive grant proposal. By teaching about the relationship between healthy soils and climate change through educational materials, training and workshops, and direct technical assistance, the WCCD will advance a much better understanding of and practices for a sustainable future in Worcester County.

Thank you for your consideration,

Donna M. Williams, Conservation Committee Co-Chair

Worcester Garden Club
P.O. Box 20827
Worcester, MA 01602
worcestergardenclub.org

January 24, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Wachusett Garden Club (WGC) is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Healthy Soil Challenge Initiative Grant for 2024. WCCD programs have supported WGC members by providing soil testing to our many community gardeners, offering workshops, and supplying native plants and technical assistance for home gardeners across our participating communities.

The WGC was founded in 1986 in Princeton, MA and has since grown with 60 members across Worcester County in Holden, Rutland, Sterling, West Boylston, Worcester, Templeton, and Royalston. Our mission is to promote the study of horticulture and the love of gardening, and encourage conservation. Some of our primary interests include habitat protection, native planting, preservation of pollinators and collaborative projects with schools, garden clubs, and town councils and commissions.

Our members would definitely benefit from the funding of this proposal. Should WCCD be awarded, WGC would be happy to support the community engagement component of WCCD's proposal and promote workshops among our members in addition to sharing materials. Healthy soil is something that is central to our gardening efforts and valued by our members.

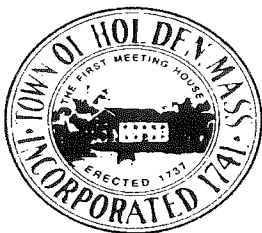
We are also very interested in working with you on promoting healthy soil in lawn management, using less fertilizer and including native ground cover/meadows. These efforts are key to increasing biodiversity and reducing the use of our natural resources.

Please let us know if we can help in any other way.

Sincerely,

Dot Odgren Kathy Olson

Dot Odgren & Kathy Olson
Co-Presidents, Wachusett Garden Club
onlinewgc@yahoo.com
PO Box 555, Princeton, MA 01541



TOWN OF HOLDEN
MASSACHUSETTS
CONSERVATION COMMISSION

January 18, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District
52 Boyden Road
Holden, MA 01542

Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

The Holden Conservation Commission is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Healthy Soil Challenge Initiative Grant for 2024.

The mission of the Holden Conservation Commission is to protect wetlands in Town by administering the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act (WPA) and the local Wetland Bylaw which has been extremely successful in regulating projects and reducing environmental degradation. WCCD programs have complimented our mission and served Holden residents through soil testing, promotion of native plants through seedling and fall bulb sales, and additional community programming.

WCCD's EOEEA proposal seeks to improve soil health practices within the disturbed, agricultural, and forested landscapes of Worcester County through education, technical assistance, and access to materials and resources. A primary focus of the program will be lawns, ornamental landscapes, impervious surfaces and degraded areas within the developed landscape, but it will also include outreach and assistance to farmers and forest landowners. This programming will be a huge asset to Holden residents, many of whom live in suburban neighborhoods. Should WCCD be awarded, the Holden Conservation Commission looks forward to promoting their programming throughout the Town of Holden.

Sincerely,

Michael Scott, Chairman,
Holden Conservation Commission

BUILDING INSPECTION/ZONING
(508) 210-5538

HEALTH
(508) 210-5542

PLANNING/CONSERVATION
(508) 210-5539

January 18, 2024

Worcester County Conservation District

52 Boyden Road

Holden, MA 01542



Dear WCCD Board and Staff,

Lady Fern Farm is pleased to submit this letter of support for the Worcester County Conservation District's (WCCD) proposal to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Healthy Soil Challenge Initiative Grant for 2024.

Lady Fern Farm is a woman-owned native plant nursery located in the city of Worcester. Lady Fern Farm offers strictly native plants and no cultivars. Many of the plants grown are on the Massachusetts endangered species list and are hard to find. We track our plant and seed sources to ensure that they are strictly native, and we use parent plants that have been confirmed native. In addition to conscientious water usage, we use no chemicals, homemade fertilizers (comfrey and compost tea), and ethically source our seeds and plants.

WCCD's EOEEA proposal compliments our mission as a native plant nursery. We are particularly excited about WCCD's proposed soil sampling, emphasis on organic practices, and conversion of lawns to native habitats and lawn alternatives. These are practices we have been supporting in our own work within lawns, yards, city parks and medians, and other ornamental landscapes. Should WCCD be awarded, we look forward to promoting their offerings throughout our community, and are pleased to join their directory of native plant nurseries offered to residents who wish to foster healthy and beautiful native ecosystems.

Sincerely,

Nikki Howell

Owner Lady Fern Farm

<https://ladyfernfarm.com/>