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## COLUMNS

# Moon garden a chance to help native moths and other wildlife

**Liz Nye** Special to the Telegram & Gazette USA TODAY NETWORK

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Every July, thousands of people around the globe celebrate National Moth Week by sharing photos and observations that help researchers better understand these winged denizens of the night. Despite moths representing roughly 90 percent of species in the order *Lepidoptera*, the taxonomical group that also includes butterflies, there is still much to learn about moth ecology.

Only in the last few years has the scientific community come to realize the outsize role moths play in pollination. Since their work happens on the night shift, we humans often miss it. But studies have found that nocturnal moths are linked to complex plant-pollinator networks. In a world that faces the double crisis of climate change and biodiversity loss, protecting ecological networks like these couldn't be more important.

Supporting native moths and other crepuscular wildlife — those creatures active during the magical hours of dawn and dusk — is something we all can participate in. Many of the same ecologically sensitive actions that are good for day-flying pollinators — planting native plants, avoiding pesticides, and leaving the leaves — benefit moths and other nocturnal insects, too. But for plant-lovers who enjoy cultivating a sense of whimsy in the garden, or anyone seeking the thrill of a bat flying overhead on a summer night, another approach could be of interest.

## Create a moon garden

As a design concept, moon gardens date back centuries. These serene garden spaces typically feature fragrant plants with white flowers and silvery foliage to reflect natural light at night. With native plants, moon gardens can be luminous, wonderous, and built to serve ecological goals all at the same time.

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A diverse palette of native perennials makes for good moon gardens:

● White flowers with strong scents like white garden phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) help attract moths after dark. The pale blooms of spotted beebalm (*Monarda punctata*) can be effective, too. Plant beebalm with mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum* spp.) in drifts both for visual impact and to mimic how these species spread naturally. These plants also add a little weedy roughness that provides vital habitat for insects.

● Taller, shrubbier plants like black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), with its wispy spires of white flowers, deliver visual interest, and culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*) adds an even more ethereal aesthetic.

● Common evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), which opens at night, anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), and common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) provide nectar resources and pops of color.

● For wetter sites, consider white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*) or great blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*), both plants that serve as hosts for specific *Lepidoptera*.

● Flat-topped white aster (*Doellingeria umbellata*) offers late-season interest and supports pollinators when other flowering species have passed.

To anchor a moon garden, look to white-flowered shrubs like witherod (*Viburnum nudum*), summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), or smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*). And though not necessarily part of a moon garden design, trees like oaks (*Quercus* spp.), willows (*Salix* spp.), and cherries (*Prunus* spp.) should not be

forgotten. These trees provide enormous ecological benefits as hosts to native caterpillars.

## Don't forget the darkness

Moon gardens that support moths and other nocturnal wildlife should always be paired with efforts to limit light pollution. Artificial light emanating from our buildings and streets at night harms people and the planet. It disrupts the migratory cycles of birds, impacts our circadian rhythms, and contributes to climate change. Organizations like DarkSky International offer resources to help community members learn more about light pollution and make changes that reduce it, like using warm LED bulbs and shielding outdoor lights.

Ultimately, preserving darkness at the scale needed to protect the broader environment will take collective action. Earlier this month, the Massachusetts State Senate took a significant step in this direction, passing the “Dark Skies Bill,” legislation that recognizes the dangers of light pollution and includes guidelines for reducing it.

## Observe, enjoy, act

Whether going “mothing” in honor of National Month Week, establishing a moon garden, or simply setting out to learn more about the connections between native plants and wildlife, actions like these help move our neighborhoods, communities, and planet toward a healthier future. Many local environmental and horticultural organizations can help provide gardening resources and inspiration along the way! *Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill team. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at [nebg.org](https://www.nebg.org). The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.* *Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill team. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve*

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