

OAKLAND

Butterfly lovers say landscaping to benefit bugs help humans, too

Three quirky nature lovers with big smiles and a sense of humor had no trouble selling this audience of special people on the idea of replacing lawns with native plants that are butterfly-friendly.



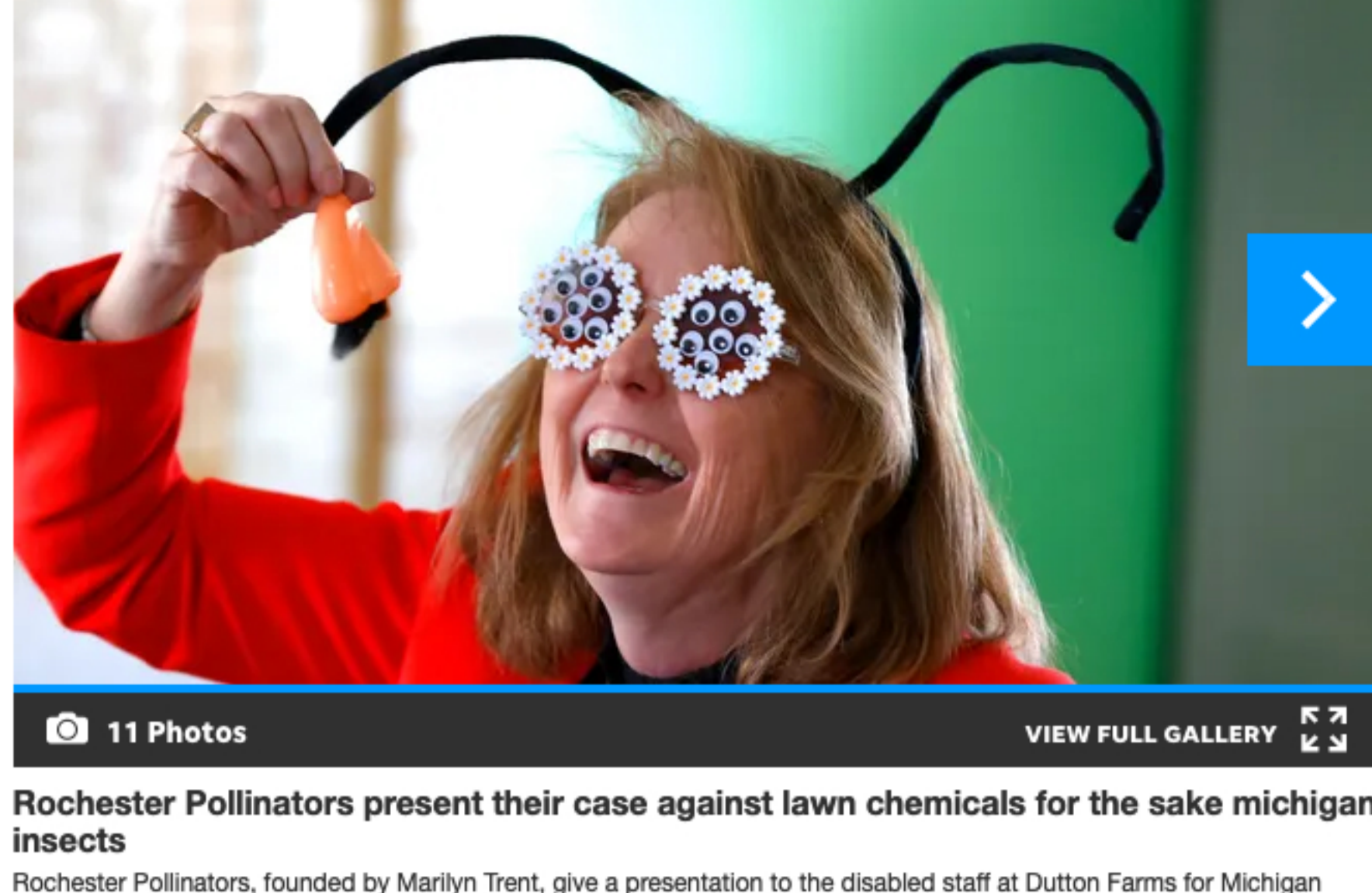
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Rochester Pollinators present their case against lawn chemicals for the sake michigan insects

Rochester Pollinators, founded by Marilyn Trent, give a presentation to the disabled staff at Dutton Farms for Michigan pollinators and plants.

It's that time of year when homeowners and "turf professionals" start spreading chemicals on lawns.

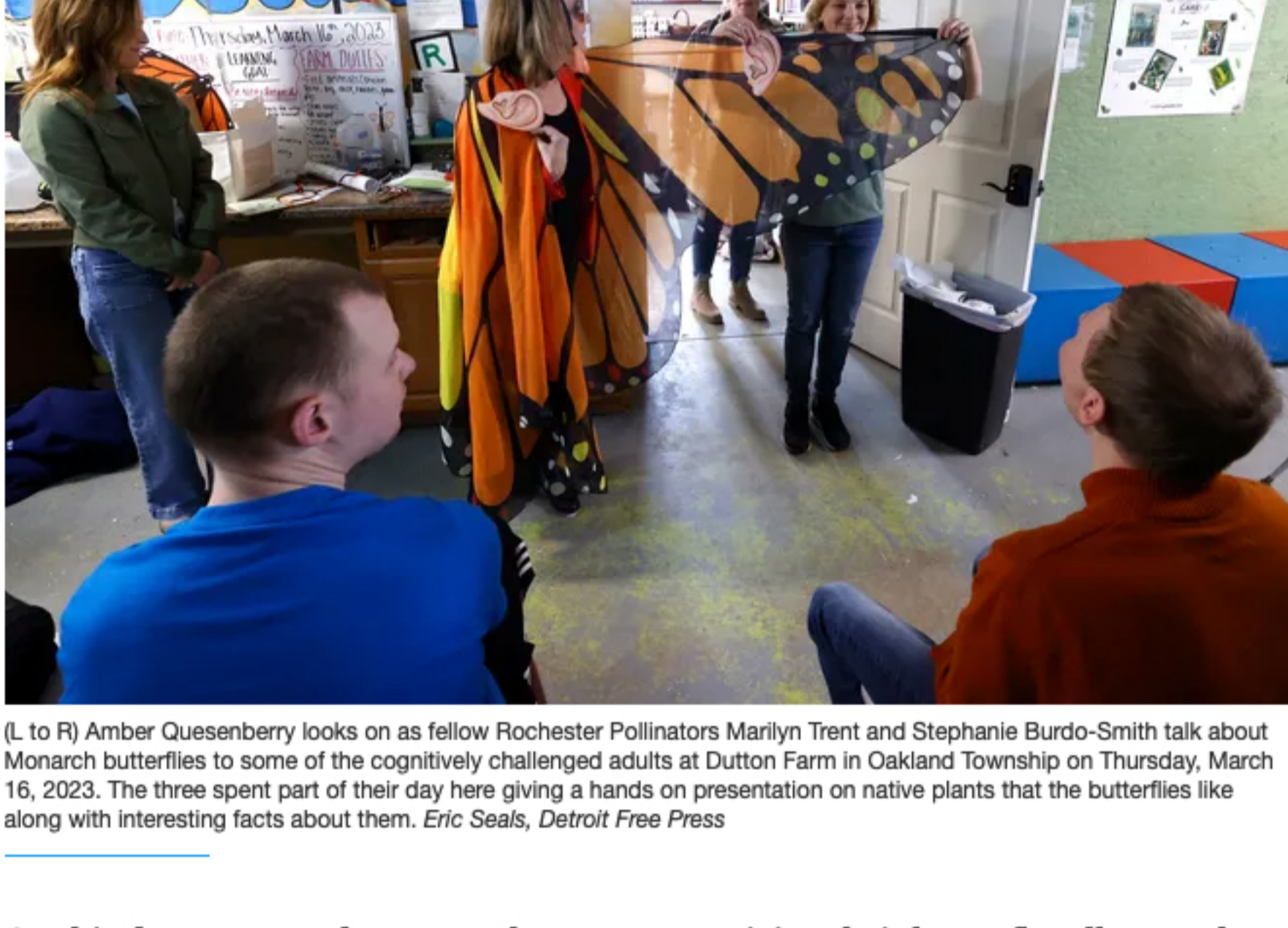
It's also when farmers across Michigan and elsewhere apply their own agrichemicals, hoping to improve yields of everything from carrots to cherries.

Recently making the case against those chemicals were three women, one dressed as a monarch butterfly. They also made the larger case, tactfully, against lawns. In a community 30 miles north of Detroit, this trio delivered a cheery presentation they've given to service clubs, mayors, teachers and students, church groups, and their own neighbors. It's an amusing yet earnest plea on behalf of Michigan's pollinator insects and the countless species that depend on them for a healthy planet, including humans.

Key points, for those set to play host to butterflies:

- **Start small:** Knock out a problem area of turf, such as a shady spot, and replace it with plants native to Michigan.
- **Expand beds:** Bring garden beds out a foot each year, reducing the need to mow, water, fertilize and use weed killers.
- **Attract pollinators:** Choose plants such as native Michigan milkweed and coneflowers that feed key insects.

"We don't say just eliminate your grass, although some of us have done that. Well, I have, most of it," a chuckling Marilyn Trent told a reporter. She's a Rochester city councilwoman and founder of the [Rochester Pollinators](#).



(L to R) Amber Quesenberry looks on as fellow Rochester Pollinators Marilyn Trent and Stephanie Burdo-Smith talk about monarch butterflies to some of the cognitively challenged adults at Dutton Farm in Oakland Township on Thursday, March 16, 2023. The three spent part of their day here giving a hands on presentation on native plants that the butterflies like along with interesting facts about them. *Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press*

On this day, Trent and two co-volunteers were giving their butterfly talk, complete with Trent dressed as a monarch, at Dutton Farm in Oakland Township. It's where adults with developmental disabilities staff a farm market each summer, and year-round they look after a goat, a rabbit, a chicken, and each other. They laughed at Trent's zany costume, and they cheered the Pollinators' message to "think Michigan natives" instead of grass.

"Did you know that 90% of the monarch butterflies have been wiped out? That's because we've wiped out all the foods that the baby monarchs need," Trent told them.

The other side of the argument hardly needs telling. It comes in a torrent these days from pitchmen, attired like naturalists or backwoods gurus, and selling a season's worth of landscape chemicals. Increasingly, they call their products "natural" and "organic." It also comes, unspoken, from the almost universal standard that says lawns, as well as hybrid plants foreign to Michigan, are the best look for American neighborhoods. Against this economic and cultural momentum, the voices for alternatives seem hardly louder than a butterfly.

Pollinator Champions

Still, the low-key enemies of traditional lawns are sprouting. More than 3,200 people have taken Michigan State University's free, online course called [Pollinator Champions](#); and of those, 525 people paid \$30 for the optional Powerpoint presentation and handouts, which "let them give our basic talk to the public," said course writer Meghan Milbrath, an MSU assistant professor. To find MSU's course, enter "pollinator champions" into a search engine such as Google.

Milbrath is a nationally known expert on beekeeping and co-author of numerous studies of insects in Michigan. She said Michigan relies on wild bees as well as "managed honeybees" for pollinating farm crops; and that the state contains the summer breeding grounds of the eastern monarch butterfly – that is, what's left of the diminishing monarchs. While MSU's research shows that farm chemicals can be applied with extra care to minimize their impact on pollinating insects, researchers provide no such exoneration to chemicalized lawns.

Another beekeeper getting attention is Brian Peterson of Detroit, a fifth-grade teacher, and ardent promoter of pollinating insects. Peterson co-founded a nonprofit called Bees in the D that oversees 220 hives at 70 locations in southeast Michigan, with help from dozens of volunteers, he said.

"Our hives have honeybees, but we teamed up with Liberty Title to help us with native bees. We're trying to provide more real estate for bumblebees and other species" of bees that don't live in groups, he said. The real estate favored by bumblebees does not in the least resemble a golf course.

"For pollinators, a lawn is a dessert," Peterson said. "That doesn't mean you shouldn't have any lawn. People can try to have just part of their property devoted to native plants," he said.

As much as Peterson is fond of bees, he acknowledged the lure of monarchs, whose storied migrations take them each year from as far north as Canada to their winter grounds in Mexico. His group passes out milkweed seeds, encouraging people to sow the plant on which monarch caterpillars feed.

"But milkweed only helps the young monarchs. Adults need a diversity of plants to survive. All of these insects need that," he said.

Nudging the plight of pollinators further toward survival is a civic gesture called the Mayor's Monarch Pledge. It's a promise given by elected leaders to make their communities more pollinator-friendly, in everything from policies on mowing parklands to local ordinances on what homeowners are allowed to do with their front yards.

In Michigan, about two dozen mayors and township supervisors have signed the pledge or, like Grosse Pointe Park Mayor Michele Hodges, are in the process of doing so.

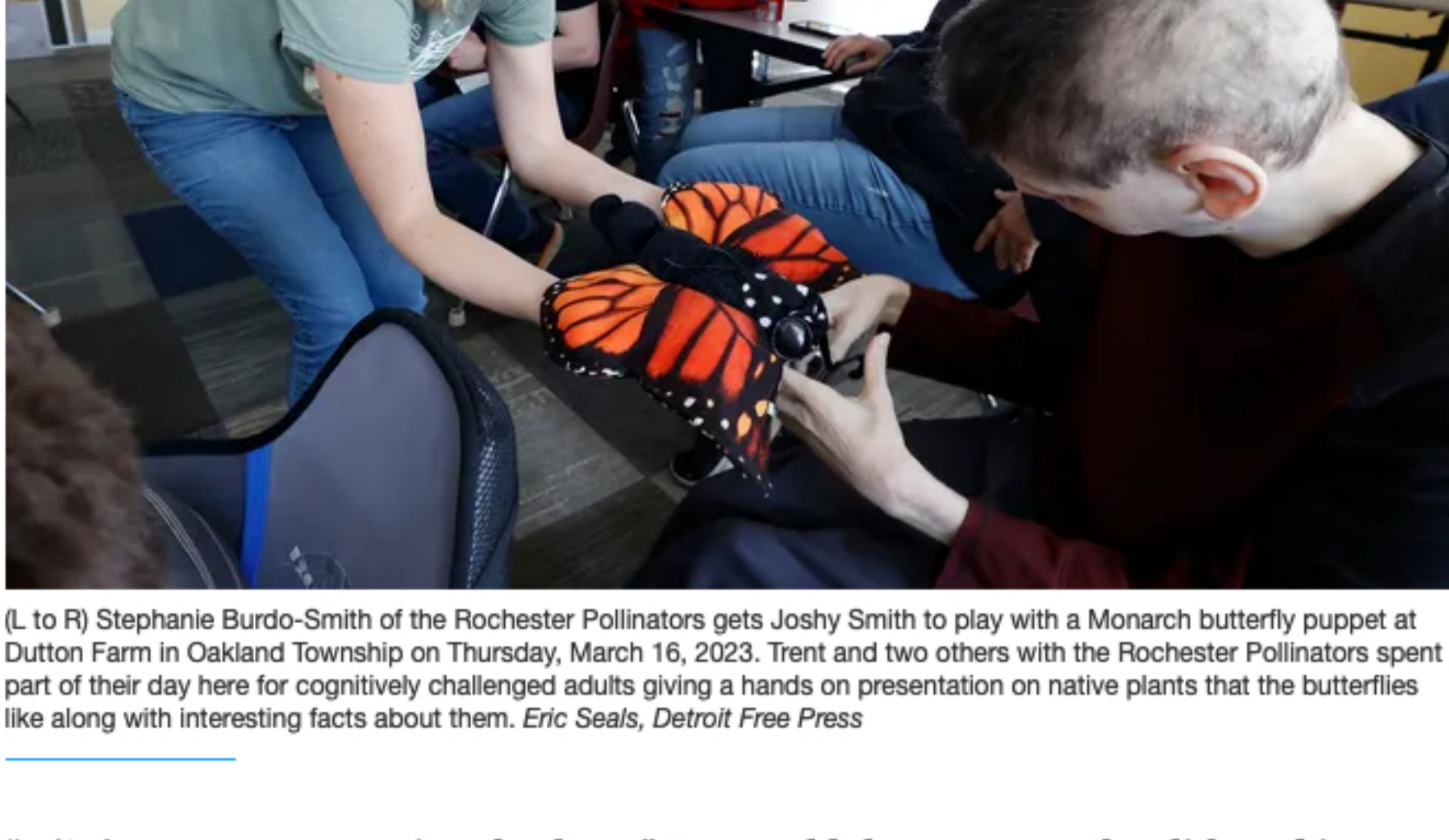
Regional leaders

"It's not official yet but we've made the commitment. I think it will be on our next agenda," Hodges said. Early pledgers to this program of the nonprofit National Wildlife Federation, going back several years, include the mayors of Ann Arbor, Farmington Hills, Novi, Pleasant Ridge, and Warren. Others with pledges "in progress," like Grosse Pointe Park, include leaders in Orion Township, Plymouth, Rochester Hills, Sterling Heights, and West Bloomfield.

So, will the residents of Grosse Pointe Park soon be erasing their lawns? And soon be spurning the fertilizer firms and weed-killing crews? Not at all, Hodges said.

"Progress happens incrementally. I think we'll see a shift in what constitutes beauty," she said.

There was no talk of lawns and lawn chemicals when the Rochester Pollinators performed their insect-friendly show for the regulars at Dutton Farm. Inside the front room of the farmhouse, all the patter was about plants that don't need a chemical boost to enjoy life in Michigan.



(L to R) Stephanie Burdo-Smith of the Rochester Pollinators gets Joshy Smith to play with a monarch butterfly puppet at Dutton Farm in Oakland Township on Thursday, March 16, 2023. Trent and two others with the Rochester Pollinators spent part of their day here for cognitively challenged adults giving a hands on presentation on native plants that the butterflies like along with interesting facts about them. *Eric Seals, Detroit Free Press*

"Hi! I've gotta get my wings back on," Trent told the group, as she slithered into a harness that held four-foot-long simulated butterfly wings, drawing "oohs" and chuckles from the audience.

"We travel around to tell people how they can save monarch butterflies," Trent told them. Monarchs right after hatching into caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed, and so the adult females lay their eggs on milkweed leaves, she said. Later, monarchs need the blooms of other native plants to thrive, as do numerous pollinating species in the Midwest, all of which form the food chain stretching from insects to people.