



Environmental Stewards

ANNUAL REPORT

2024

R | **RUTGERS UNIVERSITY**
Environmental Stewards
New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

envirostewards.rutgers.edu



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EXTENDING OUR REACH

Established in 2005, the **Rutgers Environmental Steward program** teaches volunteers from across the state about the impacts of climate change and the important environmental issues affecting New Jersey, enabling them to help solve local, community problems. The program includes a 16-week class and a 60-hour volunteer project. Stewards get real-world experience working on local issues from reducing solid waste to invasive species management.



SUMMARY

Since the first class in 2005, the program has trained close to 1300 volunteers across all 21 New Jersey counties.

In 2024, 16 participants earned their certification and 95 new volunteers joined the program.



envirostewards.rutgers.edu

2024

Advancing Sustainable Solutions

1,814

IMPACT HOURS

Stewards donated 1,507 volunteer hours and recruited 151 volunteers who contributed 307 hours in their communities.

1,190

NATIVE PLANTS

Stewards planted 1,190 native plants improving degraded habitat and replacing mowed lawn.

27

ORGANIZATIONS

Stewards partnered with 27 community organizations, collaborating on projects, providing services and securing resources.

\$64,397

VOLUNTEER VALUE

The volunteer hours Stewards contributed to conservation and environmental projects is valued at \$64,539

6

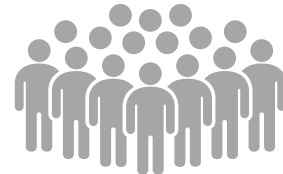
ACRES OF HABITAT

Stewards restored or improved 6 acres of land by removing invasive species, planting native plants, and providing wildlife habitat in gardens and natural areas.

16

CERTIFICATIONS

16 participants across 15 counties earned their certification by completing an environmental project in their community.

2,668

PEOPLE EDUCATED

Stewards educated 2,145 adults and 523 youth on pressing issues including climate change, habitat protection, water quality, and environmental awareness.

1,214 lbs.

LITTER REMOVED

By engaging the community, 1,214 pounds of trash were removed.

**Our commitment to
building strong,
resilient communities
includes training our
volunteers in the
following areas:**

Community Science



Climate Change



Energy Conservation



Environmental Education



Land Restoration/Habitat Conservation



Pollinator Habitat



Waste Reduction



Water



Wildlife



Empowering Stewards for Successful Community Engagement: Annual Impact Summit

The Rutgers Environmental Steward Impact Summit is a celebration of dedication, innovation, and community action. Held annually, the Summit brings together current participants, alumni, and community leaders to showcase the transformative projects undertaken by the Environmental Stewards. These projects address critical environmental challenges such as climate change, water quality, habitat preservation, and waste reduction, making a lasting impact on local communities and ecosystems.

At the summit, Stewards present their work, sharing insights into the challenges they faced and the creative solutions they implemented. This event not only highlights the achievements of the Stewards but also fosters a sense of community and collaboration among those passionate about environmental sustainability.

Attendees have the opportunity to network, learn from each other, and be inspired by the collective efforts to build a more resilient and sustainable future for New Jersey. The Summit celebrates the power of local action and the remarkable contributions of the Environmental Stewards.



Community-based learning opportunities are offered by each region in the spring



Region 2 participants use field guides to practice plant identification at Hutcheson Memorial Forest with the help of Roslyn Dvorin, Rutgers Urban Forestry Program Coordinator.



Region 4 participants learn the affects of forest fires and controlled burns, visit restored cranberry bogs, and experience invasive plant removal and native plant restoration efforts at Black Run Preserve led by John Volpa, Founder.



Region 3 invited Chris Obropta from Rutgers Water Resources to lead a green infrastructure planning session. Participants are trained using site maps and scenarios, developing skills they can bring to their local planning boards.

Annual Pinelands Tour



Emile DeVito, Ph.D., Manager of Science and Stewardship at the New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF), leads the Stewards on an in-depth tour of the Pinelands. Participants gain a deeper understanding of the complex ecological systems present in this unique habitat and the importance of protecting the largest forested area on the eastern seaboard, home to many rare and endangered species.

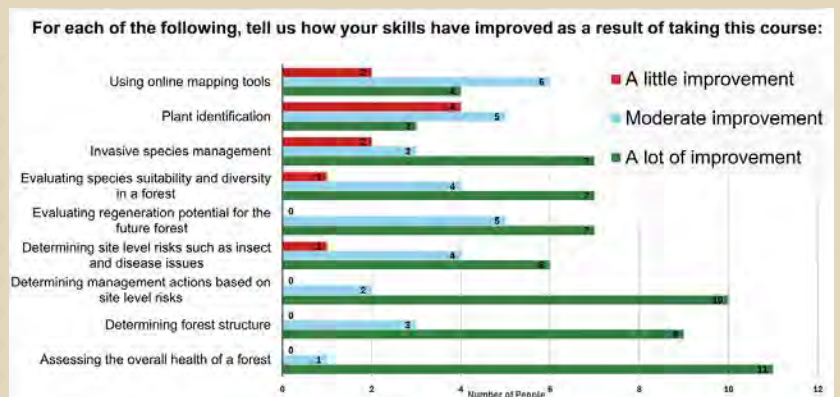


Expanding opportunities and deepening topic expertise



Advanced Forest Stewards

The Advanced Forest Stewardship (AFS) pilot program was launched in September 2024 to provide advanced training to stewards working to enhance forest health in New Jersey. The program aims to equip Rutgers Cooperative Extension volunteers, land managers, and landscape professionals with the skills to address critical challenges in New Jersey's forests such as invasive plants, pests, and climate impacts. AFS provides practical guidance on managing woodlands and forest edges, conducting forest health assessments, utilizing mapping tools, and developing tailored stewardship actions for woodland plots. The pilot program invited RES graduates and contractors from Morris, Union, and Somerset counties to participate. Through online and in-person sessions, the program provided hands-on training for local stewardship projects. Feedback from the pilot is being used to improve this annual program. AFS is a collaborative initiative of the Rutgers Environmental Steward and Urban Forestry programs.



To view the field guides:
Scan the QR code or go to
urbanforestry.rutgers.edu/plant-field-guides/

"I have already started using the knowledge and skills I've acquired in managing the property my husband and I own. I also volunteer at a county property and my learnings are very useful there."
-Participant '24

Mission Based Outcomes



The Environmental Steward

program continues to advance the **Rutgers Cooperative Extension mission** by delivering science-based education and community engagement on critical environmental issues. Through expert-led training, hands-on projects, and partnerships with local organizations, the program empowers volunteers to apply practical solutions in their communities. This year, Stewards contributed 1,507 hours to sustainability initiatives, habitat restoration, climate resilience efforts and public education, expanding the reach of RCE's mission across New Jersey.

MERCER COUNTY

Kirsi Bhasin and Anita Ryseck assessed a 5-acre area at Washington Crossing State Park to restore habitat damaged by a 2021 tornado. They created a plant inventory, site maps, and a restoration plan, and secured a \$5,000 in grant funding.

ESSEX COUNTY

Blythe Davis educated Newark high school students on sustainability through the Ocean Pathways program. She developed educational materials, quizzes, and activities, helping 20 students improve their knowledge and confidence on urban water quality.

UNION COUNTY

Carolina Dias Sotiriou promoted food waste solutions in Summit, informing local restaurants, schools, and country clubs about apps and organizations that redirect leftover food to charities. Carolina partnered with local groups to reach 14 restaurants, 4 country clubs, and 17 schools.

Engaging Communities, Educating for Change, and Sustaining Resources



WARREN COUNTY

Clairanne Arcaro worked with multiple community organizations to reach her goal to improve biodiversity along the Allamuchy Trail. After gathering a group of volunteers, she removed 15,000 invasive plants, and planted 64 native plants, 11 native tree saplings and seeded a 1,500 ft² meadow.



MORRIS COUNTY

Gene Cass created a series of educational flyers, artwork, and plant labels which were used to educate 280 people at the Snyder Research & Extension Farm's native plant garden during several events.



BURLINGTON COUNTY

Ginny Villalon inspired and educated 300 property owners on creating wildlife friendly gardens. She reached her audience by tabling at area events, farmer markets and fairs. Ginny used the National Wildlife Federation's Garden for Wildlife Habitat teaching materials.



OCEAN COUNTY

Cindy Varamo partnered with Conserve Wildlife to study Diamondback Terrapin nesting habits. She found terrapins preferred nesting near native beach grass and gray sedge, which protected hatchlings. Her data will help guide future vegetation management and research.

Environmental Steward Alumni

Long-term Engagement

Sharonda Allen, Founder and Executive Director of Operation Grow Inc., received her RES certification in 2023 and continues work in her Newark community. Operation Grow Inc. and the NJDEP Greenway Pop Up Garden is the first installation at the proposed Greenway, a decommissioned, 9-mile railway that stretches from Upper Montclair to Jersey City that will be converted into a park. This garden project serves the community of North Newark.



Sharonda Allen continues to educate and inspire the next generation



Amy Menzel, Region 5 coordinator, presents Steve Jasiecki with the Alumni of the Year award

Steve Jasiecki, a graduate of the Rutgers Environmental Stewards Program (2014), has made significant contributions to environmental initiatives in Margate, New Jersey. His projects, including developing a fleet inventory and advocating against single-use plastic bags, have helped the community advance toward sustainability goals. Steve is also recognized for mentoring other Green Teams and sharing his strategies, ultimately earning the Sustainable Jersey's Sustainability Hero award.

OUR IMPACT IS STRENGTHENED THROUGH LONG-STANDING COMMUNITY ALLIANCES



VOICES OF IMPACT

Statements from a few who have been directly impacted by our program. Their voices reflect the transformative power of our initiatives and the positive changes they have experienced.

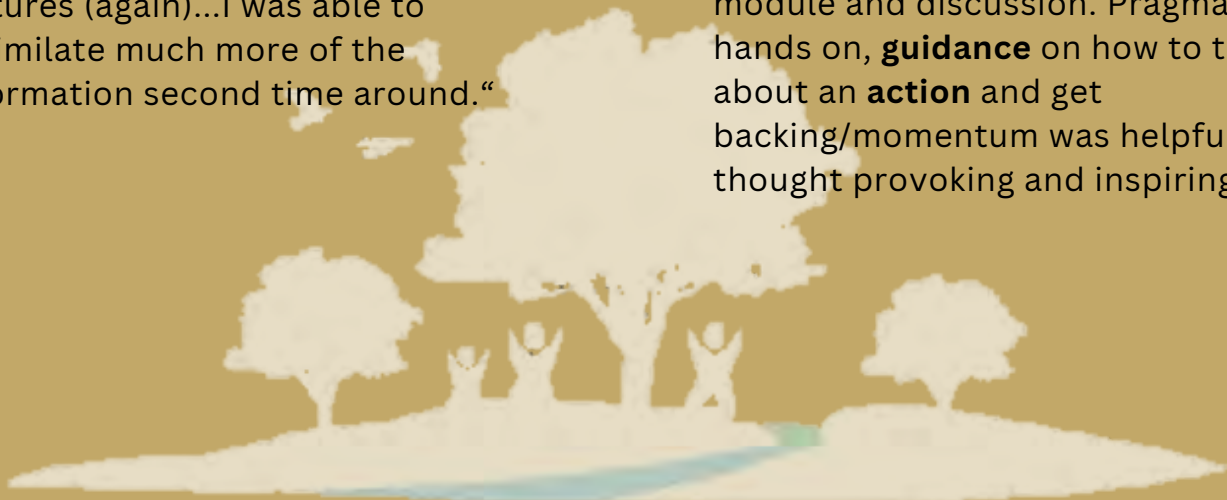
“To be better **informed** about areas I knew much less about before I took this course (for example, **food waste, storm/sewage systems, environmental justice**, etc.) is what I really enjoyed and what I think will benefit me most going forward.”

“I **learned** how many mistakes I have made regarding **native plants**, the difference between a **water** retention pond and a water detention pond and how dangerous **methane** is.”

“I've become **aware** of my own contributions to water pollution, soil degradation, and contamination. I feel **empowered** to take action to ameliorate the impact of **climate change**.”

“I appreciated that **Alumni** (such as myself) could **attend** the lectures (again)...I was able to assimilate much more of the information second time around.”

“I very much appreciated the **‘here's what you can do’** recommendations that seemed to be part of every module and discussion. Pragmatic, hands on, **guidance** on how to think about an **action** and get backing/momentum was helpful, thought provoking and inspiring.”



Program Staff



Trish Maguire

RES Program Coordinator

REGION 1 COORDINATORS

Jean Epiphan

County Agent, RCE of Morris County

Amy Rowe

County Agent, RCE of Essex and Passaic Counties

Phaedra Singelis

Program Associate II, RCE of Morris County

REGION 2 COORDINATORS

Michele Bakacs

Statewide RES Coordinator

County Agent, RCE of Middlesex and Union Counties

Jessica Schick

Environmental Program Coordinator, RCE of Somerset County

REGION 3 COORDINATORS

Justine Gray

Home Horticulture Program Associate I, RCE Mercer County

Rebecca Magron

Horticultural Consultant and Research Associate, RCE of Hunterdon County

Lynn Wacławski

Home Horticulture Program Assistant, RCE of Warren County

REGION 4 COORDINATORS

Michael Jacob

Co-leader, Southwest Chapter of the Native Plant Society of New Jersey

REGION 5 COORDINATORS

Claudia Gil Arroyo

County Agent, RCE of Cape May County

Jennifer Sawyer Caraballo

Program Associate, RCE Cape May County

Amy Menzel

Communications Manager, Atlantic County Utilities Authority



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