

The Simple Joy of Fireflies

The Firefly Sanctuary is a unique open space preserve made possible by neighbors and friends who pooled resources to buy and donate the land to the NCLT. The abundant population of fireflies living in the meadow is due to the efforts of one man, Bill McDonald.

A lifelong nature lover, Bill delights in creating natural habitats for butterflies, bees, birds, and especially fireflies. He lives next door to our preserve and has devoted fifty years to cultivating wildflower meadows around his home. Early on, he began raising firefly larvae and estimates he grows one million of them a year!

Bill explains that fireflies are beetles, and like all insects, go through a multi-phased life cycle. Fireflies spend the majority of their life

(one to two years) living underground as larvae preying on other insects. “They particularly like snails and snails like asters, so I grow many kinds of asters to attract snails to feed the firefly larva.”

Fireflies pupate in early June and turn into the adults we see lighting up the summer sky. The females flash low in the meadow while the males signal from the nearby trees. The flashing sequences are courtship rituals, and each species has its own pattern.

Fireflies are abundant on Bill’s land and especially in our adjacent preserve. When asked what makes our sanctuary so unique, Bill replied, “It’s a natural oasis in a suburban neighborhood. It meets the requirements the adults need to display. It’s a small space

On a hot and sultry evening, a young family makes their way up the woodland path to the meadow at the top of the hill. As darkness falls, the children call out, “Look, I see one in the grass, and there’s another in the tree, and there’s another and another....” They continue their exclamations until the entire meadow twinkles with thousands of lights to the delight of all who have come to witness the simple joy of fireflies.



By Popular Demand

Due to increasing popularity, the number of visitors is limited during peak viewing evenings in late June and early July each year. Advanced registration is offered on our website at www.newcanaanlandtrust.org. At all other times, the sanctuary is open to the public from dawn to dusk. The entrance is located on Sleepy Hollow Road.



with low plants surrounded by tall deciduous and evergreen trees, and there is minimal light pollution.” Darkness is essential for fireflies to carry out their courtship. He added, “Spotlights around houses interfere with firefly signaling and are death to pollinating moths and other night-flying insects.”

The other side of caring for fireflies is to preserve their habitat 365 days a year. While we don’t see the larva living underground, we follow Bill’s lead to protect their nursery. That means no pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers and minimal soil disturbance. We mow the meadow once a year after a hard frost to ensure the insect life has gone to bed for the winter. With Bill’s efforts and our own, we are well rewarded come early summer when the sky lights up with the fireflies’ amazing bioluminescence.

Why does Bill raise fireflies?

“People ask me that question all the time,” he responds. “Children know the answer right away. It is happiness.” —Bill McDonald



Bill McDonald among the pollinator plants in his yard across from the Firefly Sanctuary. Photo by Susan Bergen



Firefly Sanctuary by day.

