

Lions Club member leads effort to grow pollinator habitat in Mitchell park

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Palace City Lions Club member Cindy Easton stands in the pollinator garden at Lions Point Park on June 2, 2026. Easton started the project three years ago to establish a habitat for native plants, butterflies and bees along Lake Mitchell.

MITCHELL — What started as a patch of sandy ground in an underused city park is slowly becoming a haven for butterflies, bees and native plants thanks to the efforts of Palace City Lions Club member Cindy Easton.

For the past three years, Easton has led work on a pollinator garden at Lions Point Park along Lake Mitchell.

The park itself has long been connected to the Lions Club. While Lions Point Park is owned by the city, the club helped establish the site in partnership with the parks department in the late 2000s. Easton said the location remained largely underused for years, making it an ideal place to try something new.

The project was a departure from the Palace City Lions Club's traditional mission. Members are best known for vision and hearing screenings, collecting eyeglasses and raising money for community projects. The club regularly supports causes ranging from libraries and lake improvements to public safety initiatives and assistance for residents in need.

But when Lions Clubs International challenged local chapters to undertake environmental projects, Easton saw an opportunity.

Easton, a longtime gardener and 15-year member of the club, said the idea took root after she attended a forum where speakers discussed pollinator gardens and native plants.

“I came back and looked at that park differently,” Easton said.

While walking through the area after a rainstorm, she noticed small purple wildflowers growing naturally despite regular mowing. The sight convinced her that a pollinator garden could survive in the park's challenging conditions.

She pitched the idea to fellow Lions Club members.

“They kind of looked cross-eyed at me,” Easton said with a laugh.

Getting the project off the ground required far more than planting flowers.

The first challenge was the soil.

“The dirt out there is basically sand,” Easton said.

To improve growing conditions, volunteers hauled pickup loads of compost from the landfill and worked it into the ground. Easton also accepted perennial donations from local residents who were dividing flower beds at home. Those early contributions included lilies and irises that helped establish the garden while native species were added over time.

Water quickly became another obstacle.

Because the park sits too low for a conventional water line, the garden has no easy access to irrigation. Last summer, during a particularly hot and dry stretch, Easton and her husband carried five-gallon buckets of water by hand from their vehicle to keep plants alive.

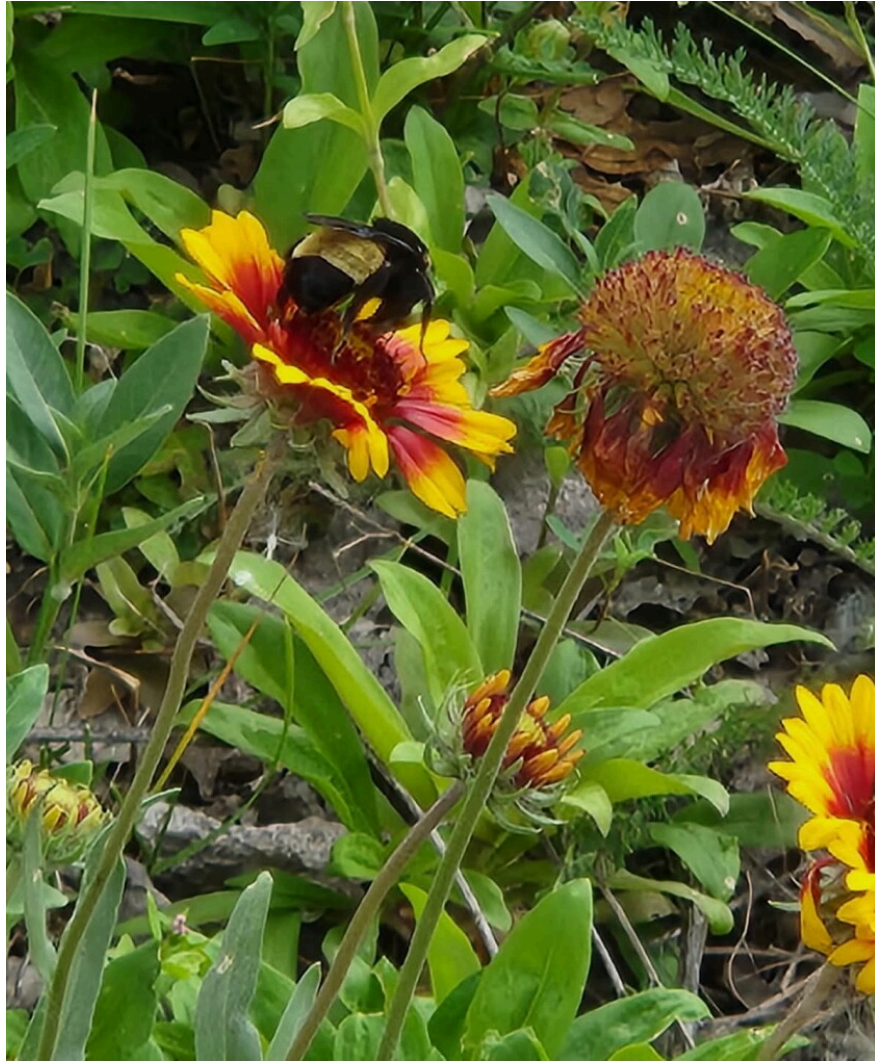
They also experimented with pumping water from nearby Lake Mitchell. The effort proved unsuccessful when algae clogged the system within a day.

“We couldn't get it through the hoses,” Easton said.

Looking for a solution, Easton found several used water tanks advertised on Facebook and purchased them for just \$10 each. Combined with support from Mitchell Parks Department employees who help fill them, the tanks have largely solved one of the garden's biggest challenges.

The tanks hold about 700 gallons of water, enough to supply the garden for roughly a month during the growing season. Easton credited Mitchell Parks Department employees Kevin Nelson, Steve Roth and especially Jason Gunnare for helping keep the project moving forward.

Other volunteers have stepped up as well. Fellow Lions Club member Craig Bennett tilled the original plot and continues mowing when vegetation grows too tall. An Ethan FFA chapter purchased and scattered wildflower seed to help establish native blooms throughout the area. Volunteers who maintain the nearby bike path also helped clear space for the water tanks.



A bumblebee gathers nectar from an Indian blanket flower in the pollinator garden at Lions Point Park along Lake Mitchell. The native blooms are part of a three-year effort led by the Palace City Lions Club to support bees, butterflies and other pollinators.

Photo courtesy of Cindy Easton

Today, the garden features milkweed, dill and a growing collection of native flowers designed to attract pollinators.

The milkweed is already doing its job.

“We've got monarch butterflies,” Easton said.

The garden also includes a practical twist. Easton plants potatoes in open spaces between flowers and donates the harvest to local families in need each fall.

While the garden is beginning to flourish, not everyone immediately understands its purpose.

Unlike traditional landscaped flower beds, pollinator gardens often appear less manicured and rely on native plants that some people mistake for weeds. Easton said she has received complaints from people who viewed the developing garden as unkempt.

“We've realized we need to educate people more about what it is,” she said.

For Easton, the project is about more than flowers.

She believes natural spaces play an important role in protecting Lake Mitchell and improving local ecosystems. Pollinator gardens provide habitat for insects, birds and wildlife while reducing the need for intensive landscaping practices.

“If we're going to do all the work of getting Lake Mitchell back to Lake Mitchell, we need to be more conscious of what we do with the land,” Easton said.

She said communities often focus on maintaining neatly groomed lawns and landscapes, but lakeside environments naturally benefit from more diverse plant life. As a result, the garden avoids outside grass clippings or other materials that may contain herbicides or chemicals.

Though she has spent decades gardening, creating a pollinator garden required additional research into native plants and pollinator-friendly landscapes.

“The dirt talks to you. The wind talks to you. It all talks to you out there,” Easton said.

The environmental project complements the Lions Club's broader mission of community service. The Palace City Lions Club raises between \$30,000 and \$50,000 annually through fundraisers and reinvests those dollars into local causes.

Easton hopes the pollinator garden becomes another lasting contribution.

Her goal is for the garden to become largely self-sustaining within the next two years, surviving primarily on natural rainfall. Once that happens, the water tanks can be removed and the space can function more naturally.

She also envisions adding benches and additional gathering areas where people can relax, read, watch butterflies and listen to birds.

Easton also hopes the site becomes an outdoor classroom for school groups, 4-H members and gardeners interested in learning about native species. The colorful blooms could also provide a backdrop for graduation photos and weddings.

“I want it to be something that somebody can look at in 20 years and go, ‘The Lions Club did that. They started that. Look at those flowers,’” Easton said.