

## Susan Light – City of Mendota Heights Partner



**By: Ashley Reichard**

Recently, I sat down with Susan Light, a Master Gardener in Dakota County and a Tree Care Advisor of three years, and we chatted about her ongoing projects in partnership with the City of Mendota Heights. Susan started her partnership when she read that Mendota Heights passed a resolution to become a pollinator friendly city. The resolution included highlights such as creating educational articles to share in the Heights Highlights, partnering with organizations to plant pollinator-friendly vegetation, establishing plant sharing programs, and providing information to the public on the city's website. As a citizen, Susan wanted to know what specific steps the city was taking toward these goals. Mendota Heights had a few enlightened individuals on staff that were willing to listen to ideas, but voiced that they did not have next steps. So Susan and her partner in crime Cindy Johnson, U of M Extension and Master Gardener in Dakota County, offered to help support her community on this journey.

Susan and Cindy created a Pollinator Friendly Work Plan proposal to share with the public works director, which was accepted, shared with the city council, and passed! Shortly after, Susan set up a Master Gardener booth at the Park Celebration, a yearly event in Mendota Heights, to share information with the public. At this year's celebration, Susan had roughly 120 people approach and chat regarding trees and plants within their community. After this event, the projects began to evolve and opportunities for Susan to stay involved increased. The city was reconstructing a road along a bike path and Susan and Cindy suggested using a native seed mix in the city right of way between the road and the bike path instead of the Kentucky Blue Grass sod that was specified. They worked with MNDOT to select a seed mix of native grasses and forbs that were salt tolerant and low maintenance and much better for the site than sod. The site is a long sloped roadway. The native plants will prevent erosion and capture more of the rainfall. Since this planting, Mendota Heights has hosted an educational site visit there for residents (35 attended!) to share information about the plantings and how residents can take similar steps in their own landscapes.

In July, Susan and Cindy were approached by the city to provide feedback to Paster Enterprises, a development firm, as they began construction on the new Mendota Plaza development. The plans specified an array of trees, shrubs, and other plants that were not quite right for the location or the plant diversity of the area. With a pen in hand, Susan and Cindy red-lined the plans and provided appropriate suggestions for the site and for the pollinator friendly goals for the city. These changes included utilizing vegetation that reflected the neighboring property, Dodge

Nature Center, for a cohesive feeling. Thankful to say, the development firm made most of the changes. This work also inspired the developer from the neighboring property to approach Susan and Cindy and ask to help update their land with appropriate plantings.

While the projects add up, Susan and Cindy take the time to educate the city staff and public about what they are doing and how the city can make steps to become more pollinator and environmentally friendly. Recently, Susan and Cindy were asked to provide workshops for the staff and crew of Mendota Heights, where they shared research based evidence through presentations and physical samples. The pair have also presented at the Dakota County Engineering Conference and to the Dakota County city mayors and city administrators. This has evolved into the planning for future workshops that will be directed to the public to help them understand what being pollinator friendly means.

Near the end of our cup of coffee at Cafe Latte on Grand Avenue, I asked Susan how other TCAs can get involved in similar projects in their own communities. Her best piece of advice was to know the structure of your local government and to reach out to directors first. These are the individuals that appreciate the engagement and can help you participate in the process and become a helpful hand to the city. But you have to be the one to raise questions and push ideas that may not otherwise happen. As we can see, getting involved in one aspect of your city's vision can lead you to more opportunities. Susan also mentioned that education is key and TCAs can do their best work by continuing to gain knowledge. One of Susan's favorite educational activities is attending the Shade Tree Short Course, where she feels welcome and is able to learn a plethora of new information every year. Susan hopes that she can confidently share her knowledge with the city of Mendota Heights and they will continue to ask her to be at the table for each new roadway or public works initiative for consultations.