

Come Grow With Us 2009 a Great Success!

Avid gardeners and other interested parties didn't let a winter storm that dropped over seven inches of snow stop them from attending the Mercer County Master Gardener's "Come Grow With Us!" seminar featuring guest speakers Rick Mikula, Jim Higgins, and Scott Weikert. The seminar was held Saturday, January 10, 2009, from 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM at the Mercer County Cooperative Extension, Leslie N. Firth Learning Center on Route 19, 1 mile north of Mercer. Approximately 55 brave travelers attended the seminar.



Speaker Rick Mikula

Rick Mikula hails from Hazleton, PA and is known as "That Butterfly Guy." Rick's presentation was a crowd pleaser as he discussed various interesting facts and folklore pertaining to butterflies. For instance, he said butterflies used to be associated with death, and that going back 8000 years, "People always felt that when we died we became butterflies and with those wings we went to Heaven. And in many languages the word 'soul' and 'butterfly' is actually the same word. So I think it's very special to release them at funerals." Mikula pointed out that butterfly releases are also popular at birthday parties, graduations, and divorces.



Speaker Jim Higgins

The next speaker was Jim Higgins from Hillsboro, Ohio. Mr. Higgins is a beekeeper and President of the Highland County Beekeepers Association. "Dr. Sting," as Mr. Higgins is referred to by fellow beekeepers, administers bee stings from his home for various ailments including arthritis, hormonal problems, tennis elbow, bursitis, fibromyalgia, and carpal tunnel syndrome. During his presentation, Mr. Higgins asked if anyone was experiencing sinus problems. "How many of you in here have a sinus problem right



now?" Several hands were raised. "If you will eat a teaspoon of honey, wax and all, check your watch, in 30 minutes or less your sinuses are going to open up and be fine for the day," Mr. Higgins said. This type of therapy is known as apitherapy and includes 6 products from bee hives: honey, pollen, propolis, royal jelly, and bee venom.

Mr. Higgins astonished the audience by allowing himself to be stung on the wrist by a honeybee. His display of apitherapy products included a screened box of several honeybees for just this purpose. "The stinger has three points to it, nestled together with a little cavity between the three points that becomes Mother Nature's hypodermic needle," Mr. Higgins said. "Two of those points have barbs at the sides so when it hits you, one of these will seat under the skin and hold so that the other one can go in," Higgins explained. He also pointed out that after stinging, the honeybee dies within 24 hours because it disembowels itself after depositing its stinger. The stinger has a bulbous sac loaded with venom and the sac acts as a pumping unit for discharging venom. Higgins likened this process to a computer system: "Bees don't have the nervous system that you and I have; it's kind of like having computer chips hither and thither around the body that do their thing in their part of the body independent of the rest of the body."

Speaker Scott Weikert

Scott Weikert, Forest Resources Educator for Penn State Extension in Forest County, gave a Power Point presentation on what gardeners and homeowners might do to increase their chances of attracting birds and other beneficial wildlife to their landscapes. “Water is probably one of the most important and often overlooked aspects that wildlife need,” Mr. Weikert said. “Many times if you can just add water if there’s none around, it can be a real magnet for all kinds of different birds.” Weikert suggested planting raspberries to attract birds in summer and said, “Dogwoods tend to fruit late summer into fall, crabapples and hawthorns bear their fruit in fall but these can last well into winter. I still have a crabapple in my yard that’s just loaded so some plants will tend to hold their fruit longer into winter.”

Weikert stressed to those wanting to add new landscape plants that they be knowledgeable about which plants bear fruit. “Make sure you know what plants to use so you’re not wasting time and money,” he said. Weikert showed a photograph of a flowering cherry which does not bear fruit and is used as an ornamental tree in the landscape. Weikert also talked about the importance of having cover wildlife and birds can use for shelter in your landscape. “If you can provide some good winter cover, whether it’s a conifer thicket, or something similar to that, particularly in the wintertime, will improve the conditions for attracting wildlife; and birds in particular like having the conifers around in the wintertime,” he said.



Out of town guests found the program to be very beneficial. I spoke with Linda Herhold, who drove from McMurray, south of Pittsburgh. “I’m an avid gardener and I enjoy coming to the conference every year. Linda said she’s been attending the Mercer County Master Gardener seminars for the past two or three years. “Today’s presentations were very informative and speakers had excellent information and are a wealth of knowledge.” Linda plans to use the information from Rick Mikula’s presentation to help her attract more butterflies in her small garden in the suburbs. “I plan on adding more plants that are good for butterflies,” she said.

Local gardeners, Ruth Woods and Dorothy Hurt live in Indian Run, a farming community between Mercer and New Wilmington, and both were pleased with this year’s seminar. I spoke with Ruth after Mikula’s presentation and she said, “I came today because I’ve always been interested in nature and I’m amazed at how much I didn’t know that we learned today already.” After finding out about a butterfly seminar being held by the Master Gardeners, Dorothy said, “I’m interested in the plants, and would like to know what plants they come from, and what plants they need to lay their eggs on.”



The Mercer County Master Gardeners would like to thank the presenters and all who attended the Come Grow With Us! seminar. We look forward to many more occasions in the future for a chance to inform and educate the community on the many joys of gardening.

Author: TC Conner, Mercer County Master Gardener