

The Wilds of Westchester

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It's 3:00 a.m. and this article is late. I mean, days late. I've been suffering from a case of writer's block, or rather choice paralysis. Do I write about the queen bumblebee, of indeterminate species, that visited my lilac bush yesterday? The one that, months earlier, found a soil cavity underground within which to hibernate for months, alone and brooding a batch of young? Or should I write about the sandhill cranes that flew over Westchester in droves just last month? The ones that ventured north from Tennessee and Louisiana on their way to Minnesota and Canada? One could mistake them for a distant flock of geese if not for their peculiar (and loud!) bugles.

I turn to peer out my front window and am startled by a hulking figure on my front lawn. My heartbeat indicates I'm being chased by a character from a horror movie, but none of my cats seem bothered. With one cat under my arm, I brave a closer look and find I'm staring at two adult Bambi's chowing down near our sapling oak tree. The deer are hulking and I'm intrigued: Why my lawn? Could it be the plethora of dandelions that have brought little spots of sunshine to my yard? Or the purple clover that is slowly edging out blades of grass? Or, is it the grass itself? It's too dark to tell, but I find myself proud to have provided a meal for one of the wondrous beasts that Disney used to inspire me as a young child.

And voilà, we have a topic: Food.

Everybody needs it, but for some, it has become scarce. Let's take monarch butterflies, for instance, the caterpillars of which feed only on milkweed that has become less and less common over the past several decades, largely due to pesticide use and a cultural drive to create manicured landscapes. Now an icon of conservation, the monarch and its food source are receiving a renewed sense of focus that is visible in yards across Westchester. But the same cannot be said for the other 150+ species of butterfly that call Illinois home, or their food sources. Even our woodland species, like deer, are having a more difficult time accessing spaces to forage, because the woods themselves are being crowded out by invasive buckthorn. Have you noticed the dense brush along the edges of the forest preserve? That's buckthorn, escaped from people's yards, that is creating an impenetrable landscape.

Don't get me wrong, I will be sad to find that the deer may have munched down the early buds of my front yard plants, but I will still take solace knowing that what they ate in my yard was as healthy as it can get. Energetically speaking, organisms lose 90% of what they consume through the process of cellular respiration that fuels their bodies. This leaves approximately 10% to be retained as biomass, or the organism's live weight. In the world of ecology, this means that only 10% of a lower trophic level is available to the next trophic level when consumed. You must take

these percentages as an approximation, but the result is the same: Energy is lost as one moves up the food chain, therefore there is less energy available to higher level consumers (think: omnivores and predators).

As these organisms consume matter, they tend to retain any fat-soluble, persistent organic pollutants to which they are exposed. This means that if the deer feeding off my lawn, or the bumblebee sipping nectar from the lilac, were to ingest a fat-soluble pesticide or herbicide, those components could build up, or accumulate, within their system over their lifetime. Ecologists refer to this as bioaccumulation.

Now, should the deer or the bee be consumed by another organism, then that organism will ingest and likely retain much of that chemical. That predator, of course, does not just eat a single bumblebee or deer. Instead, it consumes many of them, and other organisms, in order to account for the 90% of energy it loses to metabolic processes. As a result, across the consumer's lifetime, the concentration of toxin increases beyond that of its prey. This leads to biomagnification, or the increase in concentration of toxins up the food chain.

It is this premise that endangered the bald eagle given its repeated exposure to DDT, a pesticide that increased in concentration as it moved up the food chain and ultimately resulted in thinned egg shells that could not support the weight of brooding parents. In the wilds of Westchester, this can manifest in many ways, from the owls or foxes who are poisoned by eating rodenticide-laced prey to the immuno-compromised bird who ate one too many caterpillars off an insecticide-treated shrub.

It's 7:45am now and I must be off to work, but first I encourage you: This summer, take a pause before using pesticides, herbicides, or rodenticides to consider alternative methods or how it can be deployed in a targeted and sparing fashion, lest Babmi, Friend Owl, or your neighborhood bumblebees bear the consequence.



Caption:

A young white-tailed deer.

Green Fact of the Month:

In 1820, Illinois had 22 million acres of prairie land mainly found in the northern two-thirds of the state. By 1978, less than 2,300 acres remained and Westchester has 82 acres of prairie land called the Wolf Road Prairie. This prairie is home to more than 360 native plant species. See Forest Preserves of Cook County at fpdcc.com and Illinois Department of Natural Resources at dnr.illinois.gov.

Recipe of the Month:

This recipe works well for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Want to leave out the potato crust? No problem, this recipe will still turn out great removing that step. Enjoy!

Hashbrowns, Spinach and Tomato Pie

Ingredients

- 2 cups Ore-Ida Shredded Hash Brown Potatoes, thawed
- 1 cup part-skim shredded mozzarella cheese, divided (or leave out to limit dairy)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup grape tomatoes, halved
- 3 to 4 cups packed fresh baby spinach
- 4 eggs

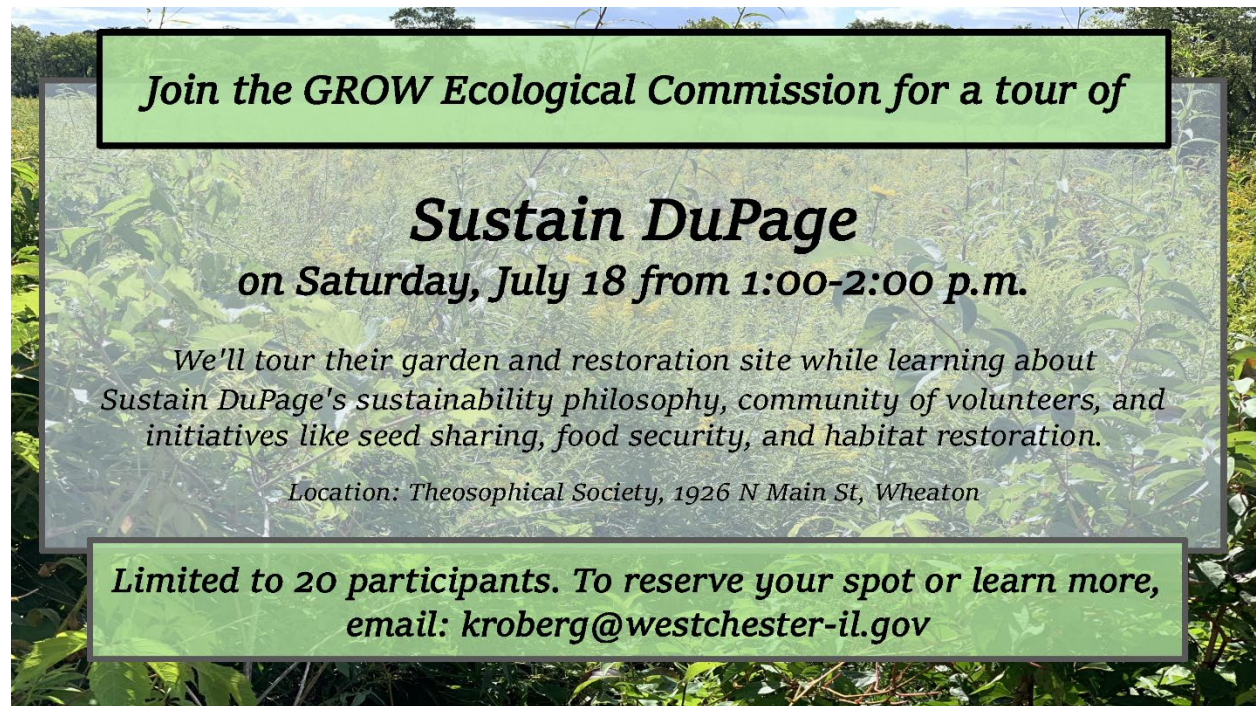
- ¼ cup milk (try a plant-based option like oat or almond)
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg, or to taste
- salt and fresh ground black pepper, to taste

Instructions

- Preheat oven to 375°F.
- Spray a 9-inch pie plate with cooking spray; press down the Shredded Hash Brown Potatoes into the pie plate.
- Bake for 9 minutes; remove from oven top with 1/2-cup shredded mozzarella and set aside.
- Heat olive oil in a skillet. Add garlic and cook and stir for 20 seconds.
- Stir in the tomatoes and continue to cook for 30 seconds.
- Mix in the spinach and cook for 2 more minutes or until wilted, stirring frequently.
- Remove from heat and spread over the hashbrowns.
- In a mixing bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, nutmeg, salt and pepper; whisk until thoroughly combined. Pour it over the spinach and tomatoes.
- Sprinkle the remaining shredded mozzarella over the pie.
- Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until top is golden brown.
- Let cool for 10 minutes before cutting.
- Serve.

Source: www.diethood.com

Have a plant-based recipe you'd like to share with the community? Send it to GROW@westchester-il.gov for consideration for future newsletters.



Join the GROW Ecological Commission for a tour of

Sustain DuPage
on Saturday, July 18 from 1:00-2:00 p.m.

We'll tour their garden and restoration site while learning about Sustain DuPage's sustainability philosophy, community of volunteers, and initiatives like seed sharing, food security, and habitat restoration.

Location: Theosophical Society, 1926 N Main St, Wheaton

Limited to 20 participants. To reserve your spot or learn more, email: kroberg@westchester-il.gov