

Every Day Is Earth Day

By Susan Camp

As I sit at my computer on this Earth Day, April 22, 2023, I am reminiscing about earlier Earth Days, when it seemed to me that everyone in the United States was ready to speak out and take action to prevent further depletion of natural resources and clean up land and waterways that had been polluted for two hundred years by indiscriminate disposal of industrial waste and poor land management methods. As I type these words, I realize how naïve they sound. We are just beginning to repair the damage we have caused to the environment.

The first Earth Day on April 22nd, 1970 has grown into an international effort to combat global warming, increase the production and use of clean energy, and educate the world's citizens about sustainable living.

Gaylord Nelson, a United States senator from Wisconsin and an early environmentalist, founded the Earth Day movement, which he envisioned as a nationwide "teach-in" to educate Americans about the environmental dangers of the time: air and water pollution from factories, highways, and commercial shipping; toxic dump sites; and wildlife extinction.

Twenty million Americans participated in the first Earth Day rallies, garnering support from both major political parties. By the end of 1970, Congress had passed the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Endangered Species Acts, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had been created.

Before Earth Day became an annual event, Rachel Carson (1907-1964), a well-known nature writer and former marine biologist, expressed concern about the indiscriminate use of the chemical pesticide DDT to eradicate fire ants in the U.S. In 1958, after years of research on the adverse effects of DDT, Carson began writing "The Silent Spring," published in 1962. It was not well-received by the giant chemical companies, but readers were alarmed, and an outcry from the public led to a ban on the use of DDT in agriculture.

Before Rachel Carson wrote "The Silent Spring," Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890-1998) was campaigning to save the Florida Everglades. As a young woman, Douglas worked as a newspaper reporter and columnist, then as a freelance writer well-known for her views on women's suffrage, racial justice, and conservation. In the 1920's, Douglas began working tirelessly to save The Everglades from pollution by the sugar cane conglomerate and waterway diversion by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Her book "The Everglades: River of Grass" (1947) is hailed as a landmark work of early conservation ecology. Douglas remained an environmental activist her entire life.

You and I aren't giants like Nelson, Carson, and Douglas, but there are plenty of simple actions we can take to improve our environment in Gloucester County. If we all make the effort, we can have a noticeable effect on our ecosystem.

We can:

Reduce or eliminate the use of harmful chemical pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers in the garden. Build a compost bin and recycle kitchen scraps, leaves, and grass to create a nutrient-rich diet for the plants.

Install a rain barrel to collect rainwater for the thirsty flowers and vegetables. This will also decrease rainwater runoff that can cause erosion and carry waste and toxic chemicals into the creeks and rivers.

Learn about native trees and plant one, or two, or three, a great way to decrease carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Continue to recycle and reuse. Recycling has become more difficult and frustrating in the past several years because of local constraints placed on glass, plastic type, and plastic bag recycling. Refuse plastic bags at the store, and keep reusable shopping totes in the car. At home, recycle plastic food containers, if possible, and return to the use of glass containers.

Plant a garden this spring, and feed it with compost. The vegetables will far surpass anything bought at the store, and they will be free of toxic chemicals.

Plant wildflowers and natives for the pollinators. The bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds will flock to the garden. Native plants also encourage beneficial insects that help with pest control.

If each of us changes in a few small ways the way we interact with the environment, we can create a cumulative impact that will improve the lives of our children and grandchildren.

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