



The Ecology of the Middle Ground

One term that we use to describe our work is "the ecology of the middle ground". By "middle ground", we mean those lands which are neither completely dominated by the human hand nor in pristine wilderness. Much of Columbia County falls into this category, including most of its farms, forests, and yards. By "ecology", we mean the ways of life not only of the wild organisms around us but also of ourselves. The health of these ecologies largely depends upon our active, informed compassion for that middle ground, and therefore much of the Farmscape Ecology Program's effort is directed towards fostering that compassion.

The [*Progress of the Seasons Project*](#) provides a way to see past and current changes in the ecologies of our land by exploring its seasonal rhythms over time - which crops are harvested when and where? When do different flowers bloom and birds arrive? Thanks to pioneering work done by 19th century academics around the State, there is a rich trove of seasonal data from that period, and, through our collaboration with the *New York Phenology Project*, there are modern data to compare those too. Having digitized the historical data, we now plan to derive school curricula which, through comparisons of modern seasonal observations to past ones, let students explore and consider changes in the use of the land and other natural resources, and in our climate.

More than four years in the making, another important effort for us is the *Living Land Project*. In collaboration with Hudsonia and the Columbia Land Conservancy, we are creating an [*Ecological and Cultural Field Guide to the Habitats of Columbia County*](#). By describing the habitats both of our semi-wild lands and of our fields and gardens, we are inviting people to conceive of the middle ground as a whole - what nature occurs in its various corners? How do we appreciate that nature and conserve it? We hope the Guide can be an inspiring tool that provides a new way to connect with and consider the conservation of the tapestry of nature in our county.

Finally, we have continued to work in the realm of agroecology and horticultural ecology. Which creatures find habitat on our farms and in our gardens? How, in turn, do they influence the production, beauty and conservation value of those lands? If we picture our landscape as awash in biological flows – the flight of bees, the ballooning of spiders, the crawling of ground beetles – and if we recognize that those flows can influence the pollination of our apples, the pest pressures on our vegetables, and the weed seeds in our gardens, and that those flows are, in and of themselves, precious expressions of life's wondrous diversity, then we need to be conscious of the role of our own hand in guiding those currents, for our own sake and for nature's sake.

The narrative above is studded with questions: Who blooms when and where? What grows in the various 'corners' of our landscape? Who pollinates our crops? We will never have all the answers, but with your support, we hope to continue searching for them and sharing our findings in ways that let us all explore our land and develop the informed compassion that will help us steward it with foresight and love.