

You hear it before you see it.

First is a distinct buzzing. It floats a few octaves higher than the sound of nearby waves. A couple more steps, and a chirp will startle you like a beat drop. Finally, after a chorus of ominous whistling and a left turn at some too-tall hedges, you're on top of it - the source of the symphony. Oh, and your shoes are wrecked.

The scene above is from a 7 a.m. stroll through one of three rain gardens on Loyola Chicago's campus. It's a haven for pollinators like bees and butterflies, and it's composed entirely of native plants. The space is maintained by Loyola's Restoration Club, a group of self-proclaimed "plant nerds" on a mission to bring Chicago back to its roots.

"Native plants are basically species that were in the area before European settlers," said Sydney Nice, vice president of the Restoration Club. "They thrive in the weather, air and soil that naturally exist here. They don't need a single thing from us."

She paused to tear a handful of vetch, an invasive shrub, out of the ground.

"Invasive plants outcompete the native ones," Nice said. "They take up more resources and can sometimes be dangerous to the wildlife around here because they'll eat them, even the poisonous ones, without knowing the difference."

Native plants, however, don't have that problem, since they're designed to survive the mood swings of Chicago weather. You know that houseplant you forgot to water for two weeks, right before you went on spring break, yet somehow it's still looking okay? Think of an entire ecosystem like that, with the Earth as a forgetful plant parent. Native plants survive and thrive with less water, no fertilizer and no pesticides needed.

Because of their environmental and economic benefits, native plants are creeping back into campus landscaping with institutions such as the University of Florida, University of Michigan and Indiana University utilizing native species in their campus designs. Still, these plants are known for a certain look: overgrown and dormant at all the wrong times. Nice said many suffer from "plant blindness" when it comes to landscaping, which means that, to the casual observer, green will always mean good, invasive species or not. And while a campus full of cardinal flowers sounds like a dream to Nice, an official from Loyola Facilities said there are other things to keep in mind when decorating a campus.

"We do have some native plants, a lot of our grasses and of course our trees as well," said Kana Henning, vice president of facilities at Loyola. "There are also visual aesthetics to keep in mind

as well. I hope people who walk through campus can appreciate and understand the different layers and levels of landscaping that draw you in. They complement our buildings and the history of the campus. I would also hope that our students find a good balance between maintained landscape and open green space on campus.”

In a crowded city like Chicago, there’s a commodity to having nothing. But many students and staff are keeping their eye on the flexible spaces in between. In order for the marriage of sustainability and manicured flower beds to be successful, there has to be a certain amount of compromise.

“I can’t help but walk around campus and notice a bare corner and think, ‘Some black-eyed Susans might be nice there,’” said Brian Ohsowski, a restoration ecologist at Loyola. “But I’m a realist, I know that an area of relatively unkempt looking plants isn’t what you want to showcase when trying to draw students to your university.”

While Ohsowski has the prestige of a doctorate, he isn’t necessarily the office type. He’s often wearing chest-high rubber waders and peering out from five-foot-tall stalks of cattail. Restoration, he said, is something that requires all hands on deck, even his. His class is spending the semester creating a restoration plan for the University that will hopefully bring soil quality and biodiversity back to campus.

“This whole thing is a swamp,” Ohsowski said, laughing at the view of the skyline in the distance. “It doesn’t matter what we’ve made it into, we still have the conditions and the wildlife for swampland, and it’s time we start planting like it.”

It’s almost humbling, how the patch of coneflowers you stomp over on your way to an 8 a.m. class can purify water before it runs to Lake Michigan, or how that annoying hydrangea bush that attracts all those bees is the reason the air feels clearer during Chicago summers.

It may not matter to you which plant you take your afternoon nap on the quad next to, but you may care about the famous Loyola bunnies, or a flooded sidewalk on your way to class. And if you care about that, then grab your nearest handful of vetch and start yanking.

“Look,” Nice said, gesturing to a cluster of milkweed pods near the lakefront, “it just grows like this. That’s what nature does, it just grows.”