

## Nature in the Neighborhood – June 2021

Balloons are colorful and festive; a cheerful way to brighten up parties and other gala events. And during COVID, they were popping up with increased frequency on suburban lawns as an alternate way to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and other happy occasions.

Are the folks at the Swampscott Conservancy party poopers for pointing out that balloons have a dark side? A set of unintended consequences that leaves us feeling deflated? Perhaps. Yet we ask readers to consider the following.

If balloons get loose, they can wreak havoc on the environment. Sometimes, balloons are even purposefully let loose for celebratory or memorial events. It's a lovely idea until we note that The Environmental Nature Center reminds us that "What goes up must come down ... All released balloons, whether they are released intentionally or not, return to Earth as ugly litter – including those marketed as "biodegradable latex" ... [They] return to the land and sea where they can be mistaken for food and eaten by animals. Sea turtles, dolphins, whales, fish, and birds have been reported with balloons in their stomachs and ribbons and strings can lead to entanglement, causing death." *see:* [encenter.org](http://encenter.org).

Animals that swallow balloons are usually killed from the balloon blocking their digestive tract, leaving them to slowly starve to death. And don't be fooled, no balloon is eco-friendly or biodegradable. Latex balloons eventually biodegrade, but it takes up to four years to do so, and a lot of damage can be done before they do. They cannot be recycled or composted.

Are we blowing things out of proportion? This is not an insignificant problem. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that "over a period of five years (2010-2014), 4,916 pieces of balloon litter were found in Virginia by volunteers participating in the International Coastal Cleanup, with over 3,000 of those pieces found on ocean beaches." *see:* [response.restoration.noaa.gov/about/media/hold-those-balloons-they-could-end-ocean.html](https://response.restoration.noaa.gov/about/media/hold-those-balloons-they-could-end-ocean.html)

All this has led communities across the country, including Chatham, Everett, Nantucket, and Provincetown in our own home state, to enact balloon laws banning or restricting the use of helium filled balloons. A bill has also been floating around at the Massachusetts State House. If passed, "An Act Relative to Helium Balloons," filed by State Rep. Sarah Peake, would ban "the sale, distribution, and release of any type of balloon, including but not limited to plastic, latex, or mylar, filled with any type of lighter-than-air gas, both for public or private use."

To protect nature in our neighborhood, perhaps it's time for Swampscott to consider such a by-law -- or at least a policy that bans balloons at town-sponsored events, on town-owned properties, or for any events requiring town approval. The town should promote the use of non-disposable, reusable decorations for such events, not balloons and other single use plastic decorations.

But short of town laws or policies, individuals should start saying no to balloons. There are environmentally friendly alternatives that can be just, if not more, colorful and festive, such as reusable banners and bunting, flags, ribbon, and pinwheels. There are many suggestions on the [ballonsblow.org](http://ballonsblow.org) website. Take for example this recent yard display -- what could be more celebratory?



So, yes – maybe we are party poopers. But our mission is to help keep our neighborhood beaches clean and marine life safe, so we'll own that. And if that's a mission you support, we hope you'll think of other creative ways to bring smiles to your next celebration.