

Sustainability Hero

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Jennifer Ryan Hsu, Ph.D.

**Chair, Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team
Passaic County, New Jersey**

After a distinguished career in teaching and research, Dr. Jennifer Ryan Hsu has turned her expertise toward public service, dedicating her time and talents to reducing waste, cutting greenhouse gas emissions, protecting natural resources, supporting the creative arts, and preserving Ringwood Borough's unique environmental character. Located in Passaic County, Ringwood lies entirely within the Highlands Preservation Area. With 42% public land, extensive forests, lakes, and parks, and a watershed that supplies drinking water to the City of Newark, the Borough's environmental health is inseparable from the well-being of the broader region.

Under Jennifer's leadership, sustainability in Ringwood has become a collaborative, community-centered practice grounded in education and action. After joining the Borough's Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team, she became chairperson and led the Borough's Sustainable Jersey certification efforts. Ringwood achieved bronze-level certification and was recertified in 2024 ([Certification Report](#)). Jennifer's communication expertise strengthens each initiative through coordinated outreach, including [Facebook](#) posts, videos, and educational fact sheets that help residents understand both the "why" and the "how" of sustainability actions.

Jennifer's message is both urgent and empowering. She emphasizes that meaningful change starts locally and that small, consistent actions add up. As she explains, "Sustainability is personal. When we care for our air, water, and land, we're protecting the future our children will inherit including that of my own daughter." She speaks passionately about climate change, the importance of pollinators in the food system, clean waterways for drinking water, and trees for healthy, breathable air.

Jennifer said she is appreciative for Ringwood's municipal leadership, including Mayor Jaime Matteo-Landis, Deputy Mayor Michelle Kerr, Borough Manager and Director of Public Works Scott Heck, and Director of Economic Development Kristen Holton, for supporting her comprehensive sustainability program. This strong volunteer-municipal partnership reflects Sustainable Jersey's emphasis on shared leadership and cross-departmental collaboration.

Jennifer has obtained \$119,000 in grant funding for cultural (Ringwood Friends of Music) and sustainability initiatives. The Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team has received four [Sustainable Jersey grants](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation totaling \$16,000, supporting projects aligned with certification actions. Applications for the [2026 grants cycle](#) are due February 13.

Protecting Waterways through Healthy Lakes Outreach: Covering 28 square miles, Ringwood includes nearly three square miles of lakes and waterways, and its proximity to the Wanaque Reservoir makes protecting healthy lakes especially critical. Sustainable Ringwood's Green Team collaborated with the Ringwood Environmental Commission to launch a healthy lakes outreach campaign, educating residents on how their everyday actions affect water quality. The Green Team published a digital brochure, "[Promoting Healthy Lakes: What You Can Do at Home](#)," supported by coordinated posters, social media outreach, and collaboration with Borough officials. An



educational program addressing the harm caused by pesticides and fertilizers was also supported by a Sustainable Jersey grant.

In 2025, Jennifer extended this advocacy beyond municipal borders by addressing the Passaic County Board of County Commissioners regarding roadside herbicide spraying near the Wanaque Reservoir and Hewitt School. Drawing on environmental science and public health concerns, she explained the risks of contaminating drinking water and exposing children to harmful chemicals. Within one week, the County announced it would replace herbicide spraying with mowing. Jennifer reflected, “This was an important result that demonstrates how education and green team leadership can influence policy change.”

Pollinators, Native Plants, and Living Classrooms: Jennifer was instrumental in the transformation of the grounds around the [Ringwood Public Library](#) into living classrooms, demonstrating how native plants, pollinator habitats, and composting practices can create healthier landscapes. Her participation as a member of the Ringwood Public Library Board of Trustees helped bridge this connection.

With the support of a \$10,000 Sustainable Jersey grant, the green team and its partners established a demonstration native plant garden and enhanced an existing pollinator garden. These spaces were designed not only to beautify the community but also to educate residents about the power of sustainable landscaping. The project reached more than 500 residents through hands-on activities, expert presentations, and community celebrations. Visitors learned about the harm caused by pesticides and fertilizers and pledged to avoid them in their own yards, with 115 residents signing on. A growing network of Ringwood homeowners is now cultivating native plant gardens, reducing chemical use, and sharing seeds through a community seed bank housed at the library.

The project began with a presentation, “[Native Plants and Ecologically Friendly Garden Practices](#),” by Tina Yi, garden designer and Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team member, followed by a series of presentations in collaboration with the Library. Featured speakers included renowned scientist and environmentalist Dr. Doug Tallamy ([Homegrown National Park](#)), Deb Ellis of the [Essex County Chapter of the New Jersey Native Plant Society](#), and Don Torino of the [Bergen County Audubon Society](#). Jennifer said, “The most exciting outcome of this project is how it brought people together. From the library to local families to residents who pledged to garden sustainably, we’ve created a network of neighbors who are invested in making Ringwood greener and more resilient.”

Waste Reduction and Composting: Reducing waste sent to landfills has been a consistent focus of Sustainable Ringwood’s Green Team work. Jennifer led composting outreach in collaboration with the Ringwood Public Library to demystify backyard composting for families with small residential properties. She gave several presentations, produced an on-line webinar, developed educational materials, and helped organize giveaways that encouraged participation. The Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team [composting video](#) remains permanently available on the library’s YouTube channel, extending the program’s educational reach well beyond the initial events..

Plastic waste reduction has also been a priority for Sustainable Ringwood through initiatives such as Bring Your Own Bag campaigns, Skip the Straw messaging, and plastic recycling education. The Ringwood Green Team was the first Borough group to participate in the [NexTrex Recycling Challenge](#), collecting 500 pounds of plastic and earning a recycled Trex bench for the Library. The team collected another 1,000 pounds of plastic earning a second bench, now installed along the exercise path at Hewitt Field. What began as a Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team effort grew into a community-wide initiative, with participation by many organizations such as the Bloomingdale Animal Shelter Society, the Daughters of the American Revolution, scout troops, the Stonetown Fire Department, Ringwood residents, and the Department of Public Works. As Jennifer noted, “This kind of shared effort across organizations and residents is what keeps plastic out of landfills and makes projects like this succeed.”



Green Business Recognition Program: Jennifer is excited about Sustainable Ringwood's recent launch of the [Ringwood Green Business Recognition Program](#), in collaboration with Kristen Holton, the Director of Economic Development. Using a \$2,000 Sustainable Jersey grant, the Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team developed a business survey, application process, review procedures, and an [overview video](#) for the program. To date, four businesses have received Gold Star certification. "We're happy to recognize businesses that are conserving energy and water while reducing waste and pollution. Building relationships with Ringwood's business community strengthens the impact and reach of our sustainability initiatives," Jennifer said.



Sustainability, Arts, and Creative Engagement: Jennifer was a member of the Ringwood Creative Team and currently serves on the Board of the [Ringwood Friends of Music](#). She believes strongly in the connection between creativity, the arts, and environmental stewardship. She has helped integrate environmental themes into the arts through photo contests, found art projects, exhibitions, and children's programming. These initiatives invite residents to view waste, nature, and conservation through a creative lens, fostering emotional connection alongside intellectual understanding.

The Sustainable Ringwood/Green Team collaborated with the [Ringwood Manor Association for the Arts](#) on a found art project that included an installation, a talk, and a workshop by artist [Kate Dodd](#), who created a display called [Understory](#) beneath a tree at Ringwood Manor. A juried art exhibit featuring more than 30 submissions explored themes of reusing, repurposing, reclaiming, and reimagining what is thrown away, bringing artists and environmentalists together.

A Sustainable Jersey grant supported a 2024 photo contest and exhibit themed *Native Plants and Their Wildlife Friends*. A reception and awards ceremony were held at the [New Weis Center](#). Reflecting on the impact, Jennifer stated that she was thrilled when one young participant told her that she spent the summer researching and photographing native plants.



Education and Academic Career: Jennifer attended the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s, a period marked by social change and growing environmental awareness. She earned a B.A. in Psychology from UC Berkeley, followed by an M.A. in Education of the Hearing Impaired from Gallaudet University. She later completed an M.A. in Linguistics and a Ph.D. in Linguistics at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate School.

Jennifer began her career as an educator of the hearing impaired at Saint Joseph's School for the Deaf in the Bronx, where she eventually served as Language Curriculum Project Director. She later joined the Department of Communication Disorders at William Paterson University, where she taught for decades. Rising through the ranks from Assistant Professor to Associate Professor and then Professor, she was named Professor Emerita in 2011. Her academic career was defined by rigorous scholarship, dedicated mentorship, and a deep commitment to accessibility and effective communication. Jennifer authored a book and published nearly 30 peer-reviewed articles, making lasting contributions to the field of communication disorders and linguistics.

More About Jennifer: Jennifer lived in a town in the Mojave Desert near Death Valley, California, where the desert landscape left an indelible impression. Her father's career in aerospace led the family to move frequently—25 different homes over the course of her childhood—giving her a broad view of geography, culture, and ecosystems and fostering adaptability and resilience. From a young age, she questioned the desirability of manicured green lawns and the replacement of native landscapes with water-intensive grass. As a teenager, she designed and built a permanent garden bed in her parents' lawn—constructing a frame, mixing and pouring cement, and transforming grass into a thriving space for plants. It was an early expression of a philosophy she still holds today: that individual choices, made locally, can reshape the environment for the better. Now in her eighties, Jennifer remains active and engaged. She started piano in retirement and has been playing for more than 12 years, finding joy and challenge in music. She enjoys skiing and walking and was once an avid runner. She and her husband, Louis, live in Ringwood and share pride in their daughter, Lily Ting, who lives in San Francisco. Their household includes a beloved dog named Crystal, adopted from the North Shore Animal League.