

Beeing Kind:

Enrich your Garden with Native Pollinators

Living the Country Life

A rich, natural environment, the essence of country living, is much more than visual beauty. It also calls for the sounds of country – including the buzz of bees.

“Country living is not just about creating a garden with pretty blooms,” says Mace Vaughan, pollinator program director for the Xerces Society. “It’s about providing plants that have a purpose, that bring in native pollinators and open the door to a landscape teeming with wildlife.”

In sterile suburban landscapes, the only bee many people know is the European honey bee, and even honey bee sightings are becoming rarer as hives fall to diseases like Colony Collapse Disorder.

Meanwhile, more than 4,000 species of native American bees go about their business unnoticed.

And what fascinating bees they are, from burly bumble bees humming over cranberry bogs, to Southeastern blueberry bees “buzz pollinating” by shaking the blooms, and squash bees that take a siesta in the flowers after their pollen delivery shift is over.

All have evolved into life styles very different from the honey bees’ hive-dwelling swarms of thousands.

Squash bees, for example, developed in the Americas along with plants in the squash family – everything from gourds to squash to pumpkins. Highly specialized to emerge just in time for their target plants’ bloom, they will fly earlier in the day and work under cooler, wetter conditions than honey bees.

Like many native bees, they are good news in the garden, not only for their pollination efforts but because, unlike honey bees or ground-dwelling yellow jackets, they almost never sting. That’s because they are solitary – each female bee cares for her own eggs in her own nest, and stinging, which brings her close to her predators, usually means her death and a halt to rearing her offspring.

Blue orchard (mason) bees, another solitary variety, are champion pollinators for spring-blossoming fruits like cherries and apples.

From almonds and avocados to watermelon and zucchini, bees are as essential as soil and water to produce our food – experts say as much as one out of every four bites we consume. With honey bees threatened, that’s yet another reason to encourage native varieties.

Fortunately, promoting native bees doesn’t have to include a lot of protective suiting or purchased trappings, since many natives don’t require hands-on human management.

The basic concepts are simple: Learn to recognize good pollinator habitat and, if necessary, enhance or restore it. The goal is a blend of bee-attracting perennials, chosen so that as one plant finishes blooming, others begin flowering to provide pollen and nectar sources throughout the growing season.

Then, adapt existing gardening practices to protect pollinators – in general, modifying tillage and cultivation to avoid destroying solitary bee burrows in the soil and avoiding the use of poisonous chemicals in the pollinator habitat.

Vaughan warns gardeners to be especially cautious about systemic pesticides such as neonicotinoids that bushes or trees absorb. “If you are interested in bees, be sure to ask how plants were raised before you buy them from a nursery,” he explains.

“Depending on how these chemicals were applied, you can find them in the nectar and pollen of treated plants, threatening bees with poison nectar as much as three years later.”

The good news is that practical information to help property owners promote bees is increasingly available, starting with the Xerces Society’s website, www.xerces.org, where bee-savvy gardeners will find a map of recommended bee-friendly plants by state.

Xerces has also published a lavishly illustrated how-to guide, *Attracting Native Pollinators: Protecting North America’s Bees and Butterflies*, and last spring, Xerces offered a starter kit of 38 plants – blue wild indigo, coneflower, bottle gentian, prairie dropseed, and more -- to create a home bumble bee garden in about 60 square feet of ground, a program Vaughan is keen to repeat next spring.

Additional sources include another book, *Managing Alternative Pollinators* from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, and websites for the Native Pollinators in Agriculture (www.agpollinators.org), the Pollinator Partnership (www.pollinator.org), or USDA (www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ECS/database/technotes.html).

Vaughan points out that even a modest commitment to bee habitat can return multiple rewards, from complementing sustainable, local food production to producing a vibrant low-impact habitat that fosters wildlife in general.

“I’m encouraging people to consider some habitat that’s overgrown and authentically natural. What attracts bees will also benefit butterflies and birds. If you build it, they will come,” Vaughan says.

“Native bees do so much for us. Beyond the practical services like pollinating our crops, they connect us to our heritage within the landscape, to the authentic country,” he explains.

“Bees are about creating the native meadows we once had, and the array of wildlife they supported. By choosing to encourage native bees, landowners are tapping into the natural history of their home sites.”

###