

Yard and Garden – 04-06-2013 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

When a speaker begins his or her presentation they often begin with a little humor, perhaps a joke or two. The idea is to capture immediately the attention of the audience. For today's article, I'd like to start with a joke. Why do bees hum? However, rather than give you an immediate answer, I am saving it for later.

The fact is, nowadays, joking about bees and particularly joking about the honeybee isn't a funny situation. Honeybees have been disappearing in great numbers for decades. Furthermore, they are not the only pollinators that are endangered. Some butterflies and other native bees have experienced significant population declines. One might ask, "Why is this happening?"



According to Dr. Marion Ellis, Professor and Extension Apiculture Specialist with the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, the following are reasons for the decline.

- Loss of habitat, including the loss of flowering plant species that provide food for bees and other pollinators.
- Insecticides, such as systemic insecticides. These toxic chemicals are absorbed by the plant as it grows, which are then ingested by bees and other pollinators when feeding on nectar and pollen.
- Parasites and other pests.
- Air pollution, which may be interfering with the ability of bees and other pollinators to find flowering plants.

Pollinators are a diverse and fascinating group of invertebrates. We have them to thank for beautiful flowering meadows, juicy summer berries, and bountiful vegetable crops. While researching pollinators, I uncovered some interesting facts. For example, of the one hundred crop species that provide ninety percent of the world's food, seventy are pollinated by bees and other pollinators. Also, the value of pollinator insects in dollars to the food industry is estimated at upwards of 4 billion dollars per year.

Like all of God's creatures, pollinators need a favorable habitat to thrive. Pollinators are beneficial insects that need plants and flowers that will provide them nutrition from the pollen and nectar as well as provide them with moisture and shelter. We call these plants beneficial plants because they foster beneficial insects. Many of these beneficial plants include common garden varieties of flowers, herbs, vegetables and ornamentals.

Although in early spring pollinators rely heavily on blooming trees and shrubs, you can help by planting early spring beneficial pollinator plants such as peas, clover, chives, larkspur, lupine, sweet alyssum, poppy and viola.

By the time mid-season rolls around, choices abound for pollinator plants that can easily be grown from seed. They include bachelor's button, asclepias, calendula, cosmos, coreopsis, dill, foxglove, lavender, monarda, portulaca, squash, pumpkin and thyme.

Finally, to sustain pollinators through autumn, plants such as agastache, cleome, dahlia, marigold, Mexican sunflower/tithonia, salvia, sunflower and zinnia are great choices.

Did you know that flowers planted in clusters at least four feet in diameter are more attractive to pollinators than those scattered about individually? Also, flowers of different shapes will attract different types of pollinators. Finally, a succession of flowering plants that lasts from spring through fall will greatly support a range of bee species and other pollinators.

This year I encourage all home gardeners to help with the cause of protecting the pollinators. Plant more flowers, herbs and vegetables that are important food resources for not only honeybees, but all kinds of other bees and butterflies. Let's face it, every flower border, bed, window box and vegetable garden helps.

And now, "Why do bees hum?" The answer is, "They don't know the words." I know, pretty lame humor, but I did get your attention— didn't I?