

Garden Update

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National Pollinator Week

It is estimated that just 1-2% of insects cause problems to human health, crops, and structures. For some, “bugs” is a derogatory term that signifies unclean conditions and a messy household. For the roughly 98% of insects that don’t fit into this description, it is a giant leap forward to recognize the importance of pollinators during National Pollinator Week.

While honey bees and monarch butterflies enjoy recognition for their contribution towards beauty, food production, and honey, most pollinators go unsupported and unrecognized. Enter the native bees, wasps, beetles, flies, moths, and butterflies, the real workhorses of the pollination world. Just 250 native bees do the pollination work of 20,000 honey bees, being more efficient at what they do and pollinating a greater array of plants. Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of our food supply exists because of pollinators. For wildlife, half of their food supply is impacted by pollinating insects, who do the hard work of moving pollen from plant to plant while collecting pollen and nectar for their own needs AND the next generation of pollinators.

“More bees? Won’t that mean that I’ll get stung?” are common questions when talking about pollinators. The answer to that is no, not necessarily. Honey bees are communal, sharing a common goal to make and defend their honey which means they get quite aggressive when their food supply is threatened. Most species of native bees, however, are solitary, never make honey, and tend to be very mild-mannered, going about their normal activities with nary a thought towards humans. Aside from bumble bees, many of the native bees are not even recognized as bees. Smaller bees like the sweat bee, the leaf-cutter bee, the yellow-faced bee, and the carpenter bee are some of the native bees rarely recognized by people, much less understood for their importance to the ecosystem.

While we cannot pay pollinators for this important activity, we can thank them and allow their numbers to flourish through smart planting and landscape management practices. Planting native plants, staying away from plants with double flowers, putting stones into the bird bath so pollinators can safely land, making sure there are flowering plants throughout the growing season, leaving a patch of bare soil for the ground nesters, installing a pollinator hotel for the cavity nesters, growing dandelions and clover in the lawn, cutting back stems of perennials to 10 inches in the spring rather than the fall, and reducing the amount of fungicides, herbicides, and insecticides are positive activities to support pollinators. More information may be found here: <https://go.unl.edu/pollinatorhabitat> .