

Pollinators and their Health

By Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator Kathleen Cue

One third of our food supply exists because a pollinator moved pollen from one flower to another. Their quest for nectar and pollen means we reap the benefits by harvesting fruits, vegetables, and legumes. Despite the necessity of pollinators for a reliable food supply for humans, pollinator habitat is in jeopardy because of reduced food sources and chemically-dependent pristine landscapes.

Helping pollinators is a local issue. Gardeners can make a difference for pollinator health by planting more flowers, supplying a water source, reducing the number of insecticides used and leaving a few dandelions and white clover for them to feed on.

The Nebraska Certified Pollinator Habitat Program was launched in 2016 to address this growing concern for the health of our pollinators. Individual gardeners, neighborhoods, churches, businesses with green spaces, schools, community gardens, fair grounds and municipalities can apply to have their garden certified as a pollinator habitat.

To qualify, garden spaces must have plants in flower spring, summer and fall; be maintained in such a manner that no or very little pesticides are used; have a fresh water source; and leave garden clean up until spring (to save native bees that overwinter in the stalks of plants). While we often recognize butterflies and honey bees as pollinators, nature provides us with beetles, bumble bees, wasps, moths, and mason bees (among many others) that are excellent pollinators too.

Single flowers—those that are fringed with just one row of petals—are the best for pollinators, allowing them ready access to both nectar and pollen. Double flowers are pretty but they are difficult for pollinators to get what they need, so limit the number of these. Herbs and vegetable plants are great sources of pollen and nectar too.

Educate yourself. The gardener who planted milkweed for the monarch caterpillars learned the “pesky caterpillars” she was killing because they were eating her plant were actually the very things she sought to help.

More information about pollinators and the Nebraska Certified Pollinator Habitat Program can be found at <http://go.unl.edu/pollinatorhabitat> .