

Plant Pollinator Partnership
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When browsing garden catalogs and books for planting ideas, keep pollinators in mind. While most flowers benefit pollinators, some are better than others.

Flowers use traits to lure pollinators. Once we become aware of these traits, it's interesting to watch for them and try to use them in developing pollinator habitats.

Plants and pollinators have a mutually beneficial relationship. Pollinators need sugar resources from nectar for flight and other activities and they need pollen for protein to raise offspring, especially bees. Many plants need insects for pollination to produce seed for reproduction.

Most pollinators are small and do not have the ability to fly long to forage for food. Many flowers only remain open a few days or less for pollination. The sooner a pollinator can find a flower, the better.

Traits that flowers have evolved to attract pollinators include visual clues like color and shape, scent, abundant nectar and pollen, mimicry and entrapment. After reading this, you might look at flowers through a new lens.

Color is the most obvious trait and the one gardener's use most since we want our gardens to please us as well. Favorite colors of butterflies are bright red and purple as well as yellow, orange and pink. Bees favorite colors are white, blue and yellow. Hummingbirds prefer scarlet, orange or white.

Another flower trait are nectar guides. We see these as interesting flower patterns such as darker colored centers known as bulls-eye nectar guides. Stripes or spots on flowers guide pollinators to the flower center to more readily locate the food source. And then there are ultra-violet nectar guides. We cannot see these but bees can so a flower may look entirely different to a bee than it does to us.

Flower shapes are easy to notice but may not be one we think about for pollinators even though they do take note. Tubular shaped flowers like Nicotiana are well known for attracting hummingbirds. Butterflies prefer open fairly flat flowers like Zinnia to use as landing pads.

Bees like shallow flowers for landing pads and tubular shaped flowers. Which one they prefer depends on if they are a long or short tongued bee. Short tongued bees prefer shallow flowers like Asters or daisies. Long tongued bees like tubular flowers such as Penstemon, Salvia and Lobelia.

When it comes to scent, flies like putrid smelling flowers. Corpse flower is an example. Moths go to flowers that emit sweet aromas at dusk or during the night such as evening primrose, moonflower and Verbena. It is said moths can smell from as far away as 900 yards. Bees and butterflies prefer mild, fresh scents. Some Orchids give off aromas similar to female insect pheromones used to attract a mate.

An example of mimicry are dark red flowers that resemble rotting meat to attract flies. There is a South African Daisy that has 2 or 3 black spots near the flower center. Male flies think these are female flies and land on the flower to mate.

While it is interesting to learn about flower traits and pollinator preferences, most insects will visit a variety of flowers. When selecting plants for pollinators, try to have something blooming from early spring to late fall. Choose a variety of flower colors and shapes. Plant in clusters to reduce the amount of time pollinators have to fly to find resources; and avoid plants with double blossoms or those listed as sterile or pollen-free.

