

Designing Pollinator Gardens, Part 1

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Last week's column on wildflower seeds prompted several readers to request information on planting pollinator gardens. Today's article will be the first of several to provide general tips for successful gardens that will attract bees, butterflies, and other animal pollinators.

While most references concentrate on planting native species, some non-native plants can also be used, if they meet certain criteria. A garden with at least 75% native species will make visiting pollinators happiest.

A pollinator-friendly landscape has flowers in bloom throughout the entire growing season in order to provide a consistent supply of nectar and pollen. Crocus bulbs, ornamental fruit trees (especially plums), and even the lowly dandelion provide much needed food early in the spring; ornamental asters provide nectar until the fall freezes kill them. A diverse landscape will include annual and perennial flowers, shrubs, and trees.

To get a wide range of pollinators to your garden, plant a diversity of flower sizes, shapes and colors. Bees are more attracted to purple, yellow, and white flowers. Red flowers, such as scarlet bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) and cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), will draw in butterflies and hummingbirds.

Many of our small native bees prefer to forage on small flowers such as yarrow or composite flowers comprised of many tiny florets, like purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*). Larger bumblebees can pry their way inside larger flowers such as false indigo (*Baptisia*) that are difficult for other bees to access.

While shopping, you may want to avoid hybrids and cultivars, since many plants that are appealing to the human eye may not appeal to insect eyes. In some cases, breeders may have traded nectar production for visual characteristics. Plants with big, showy, doubled flowers produce much less nectar and pollen than the older and less-showy singles.

Also, while at the garden center, look for signage about insecticide usage, especially with systemic products like neonicotinoids. These products can remain within the plant and cause harm to bees, although they are unlikely to affect butterflies.

Many bee pollinators prefer to forage on the nectar and pollen from a single plant species during their foraging outings. Bee biologists call this "flower constancy."

Grouping plants in single-species masses of five to seven plants is better for the bees than having just one or two plants, or scattering them throughout the landscape.

Another way to make your property more attractive to pollinators is to either get rid of your lawn, or at least make it more bee-friendly. Turfgrass is useless to pollinators, but a perfect place to put a 100 square foot flower bed. Allow clover, dandelion, and other “weeds” to spread through the yard, as these plants are attractive to a wide range of pollinators.

I'll have more tips over the next few weeks, but if you have questions on designing pollinator-friendly gardens, contact me at the Purdue Extension Service. As I write this, our phones are out of service again (any AT&T technicians among my readers?), so emailing me at LCaplan@purdue.edu is the best choice.