

Designing Pollinator Gardens – Part 2

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

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A couple of weeks ago, I discussed some suggestions for encouraging pollinators, including bees, butterflies, and birds, to visit your landscape. Mostly, I talked in generalities about the types of plants that work best for these varied creatures. Today, I'll talk about landscape design tips.

To paraphrase Bill Murray in the classic "Caddy Shack," in order to attract the pollinator, you have to think like a pollinator. (And, whenever possible, to look like one...but let's skip that part.)

As mentioned last week, most bees prefer to "work" a single species of plant during an outing. This is called flower constancy. So if a bee is collecting pollen from some thistles, she will ignore all the nearby ironweed and prairie blazing star. To optimize pollen collection, most bees will pass by chaotic gardens of dozens of different plants, and will be attracted to areas where there are masses of the same type.

With this in mind, plant five to seven plants of the same species next to each other. This provides a mass large enough to attract bees. Also, mass plantings are attractive to the human eye, as well.

Design the garden not only for the adult pollinators, but for their offspring, too. While lots of pretty flowers will attract butterflies, you also need to include the host plants for their larvae. For example, monarch adults can feed on a wide range of nectar sources throughout the year, but they can only lay their eggs on milkweed.

Preserving bare areas and minimizing the use of mulch will help ground-nesting bees, such as bumblebees and leafcutter bees, find permanent homes in your gardens. Dead trees and brush piles are also used as nesting areas for certain pollinators. An alternative that looks a bit tidier is to make or purchase pollinator nesting boxes, which contain tubes of bamboo or ornamental grasses.

I shouldn't need to say this, but past experience shows that I have to: Plan on accepting some chewed-up landscaping when you attract pollinators. Caterpillars need to eat leaves in order to grow; this causes some ragged looking ornamentals. Accept this, and keep the insecticide in the shed! If you have planted a diverse selection of plants, only a few plants will have holes in the foliage.

Most bees and other pollinators like sunny areas to feed, but they don't usually like open, windy areas. Locate your garden where it can get morning to mid-day sun, yet be protected from prevailing winds: the southeast corner is ideal. Also, be sure to include a water source, such as a birdbath with a shallow area.

For more information on pollinator gardens, including plant lists and landscaping tips, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287.