



Attracting Pollinators to Your Garden

by Carol Iskenderian, UC Master Gardener

As I was driving my grandchildren to school today, I asked them if they knew what pollinators were. They replied, "Sure, bees!"

Bees are certainly pollinators, but there are also bats, birds, beetles, some flies, butterflies, moths and other mammals included in this process called "pollination".

Some scientists estimate that one out of every three bites of food we eat exists because of insect or animal pollinators. Three fourths of the world's flowering plants depend on pollinators to reproduce, as do most vegetable and seed crops. If there were no pollinators, we would have a world without apples, blueberries, strawberries, pumpkins, almonds, melons, peaches and chocolate, just to name a few. Of the 100 crop species which provide 90 percent of the world's food, over 70 crops are pollinated by bees.

By now you may have heard about the decline in honey bees, for a variety of reasons, so we should try to offer pollinators a safe haven in our gardens. It is important to reduce or eliminate insecticide use in your landscape. If you feel you must use them, be responsible and use them sparingly. Our pollinators face many challenges with habitat loss, disease, parasites, and environmental contaminants that have contributed to the decline of many species.

We have to accept some plant damage on plants that provide habitat for butterfly and moth larvae. Since I do not use insecticides, I have "ladybugs" on my roses and other beneficial insects in my garden to take care of the bad bugs. Blue jays are not a favorite of mine, but on many occasions, I watch as one of them flies into the garden and eats an insect or spider or something else it finds attractive. The point is that if you hold off on using insecticides, you will soon build up an army of good bugs and birds to eliminate a lot of your pest problems.

Pollinators need fresh water, and they will find it in a birdbath with half submerged rocks or stones for perches. I have a very large landscape rock with several small, flat areas that hold water. This can be a favorite stop for bees, butterflies, wasps and other small insects seeking water or a resting place.

In the early spring, shrubs and trees such as dogwood, blueberry, cherry, plum and willow provide pollen or nectar, or both, when food is scarce. Some annual plants for pollinators are sweet alyssum, calendula, gaura, sweet William, zinnia, bee balm, pincushion flower, and many types of salvia.



Two bees on rock purslane



Honeybee pollinator

Other attractive plants for bees include sedums, verbenas, wallflowers, rudbeckias, lavenders, sunflowers and many more.

Hummingbirds seem to flock to the nectar in tubular flowers, having little competition from butterflies and bees, which aren't able to access the nectar. Other plants hummingbirds are attracted to are penstemons, honeysuckles, lobelias, many vines and salvias.

Butterflies, unable to hover like hummingbirds, need a place to land, and they like rudbeckia, gaillardia, liatris, calendula, marigold, yarrow, verbena and salvias, just to name a few. Butterflies need two kinds of plants, those for obtaining nectar and those for laying their eggs, which will later provide larval food.

We have to remember not to get too excited about some holes and bite marks on some of our plants, especially if we want to attract and maintain a safe place for pollinators. Also, I admit that I leave plants in the ground, even when their season is ending, if I see bees foraging on the flowers. I have lots of poppies at the end of their season still blooming and making some bees happy. I also let some broccoli go to seed in late winter; broccoli produces flowers that bees like when not much else is available.

All of these pollinating creatures are just like we are as far as their needs are concerned. They are looking for food, water, a home that is safe to raise their young, and a variety of plant materials (food) to sustain them.

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