



October 20, 2012

Originally published in  
the *Contra Costa Times*

#### SUMMARY

To help our native bee population, you can plant a garden with a seasonal succession of bee-attractive plants, provide nesting areas, and help them thrive by avoiding the use of insecticides and herbicides in the garden.

## Give Native Bees a Boost

By Chantal Guillemin, UC Master Gardener

### Nesting spots & seasonal blooms will attract bees.

*Q. What will it take to have native bees visit my garden all year, not just in the early spring?*

**A.** Our Bay Area gardens can become a favorite year-round habitat for some varieties of native North American bees if we ensure a continuous, ample source of forage material from spring through fall, and provide diverse nesting sites.

The natives include more 4,000 species, which range in size from less than one-quarter inch to more than an inch. They emerge from early spring to late summer. Unlike European honey bees, North American bees are solitary. Most are ground-nesters, but some require cavities in which to build their nests.

#### Attract Bees Year-Round

To attract bees year-round, your garden must be filled with bee-friendly plants — with some of them in bloom throughout the nesting seasons.

A variety of bees — from early-emerging bumblebees with their distinctive pollen baskets; digger bees that pollinate deep

flowers; mining bees that serve as orchard pollinators; sweat bees attracted to salty human perspiration; and large carpenter bees that extract nectar from a flower by chewing a hole in its base — will visit your flower and vegetable gardens. These bees are pollinators of tomatoes, sunflowers, apples, strawberries and peppers, as well as *Ceanothus* (which includes California lilacs), *Arctostaphylos* (manzanitas), *Gilia*, *Phacelia* (which include heliotrope), lupine and penstemon.

In midspring, mason bees (crop pollinators), ultra green sweat bees (named for their bright green thorax) and cuckoo bees (so-called because the female lays her eggs in the nests of other bees) will be attracted to flowering quince, plums, salvia, buckwheat, pears, cherries, peaches and blackberries.

In late spring, leafcutters (which line their nests with leaf fragments) will visit favorite sunflowers as well as *Grindelia*, *Erigeron*, asters, and blueberry and watermelon blossoms.



*“Insecticides poison a wide spectrum of beneficial insects, including native bees”*

In mid-summer, the polyester bee (so called because it lines its nest with a waterproof cellophane-like substance secreted from an abdominal gland) will pollinate prairie clover, goldenrod and amorphia. The sunflower bee is attracted to Clarkias, bush mallow, mallow and globemallow as well as prickly pear, apple and blueberry blossoms. The sunflower bee collects pollen from a limited range of plants.

In late summer and early fall, long-horn bees (whose pollen-laden hind legs resemble leg warmers) are important pollinators of wild and hybrid sunflowers. They also visit cosmos and coneflowers.

In general, grow plants with flowers of different shapes, sizes and colors to please the greatest diversity of bee species. From above, bees can readily spot large clusters of similar blossoms; they like these because they will expend less energy going from flower to flower.

### **Provide Nesting Sites**

As for setting up native bee nesting sites, remember that 70 percent of native bees are ground nesters. This means bare

areas of soil should be left unmulched and untilled, so female bees can establish their nests. Bumblebees are cavity nesters, so they take over abandoned rodent nests.

The remaining 30 percent of native bees nest in wood, tunnels of reeds or bamboo stems. Mason bees are fond of tunnel-nesting; many adopt artificial nests of drilled wooden blocks and reed or bamboo stems. A wood-nesting bee, such as the large carpenter bee, uses powerful jaws to excavate nest tunnels in soft or rotten wood. So leave some snags and stumps in the garden, and place artificial tunnel nests where native bees can use them.

### **Help Bees Thrive**

Another practice to ensure that native bees can thrive in your garden is to avoid use of insecticides and herbicides. Insecticides poison a wide spectrum of beneficial insects, including native bees.

For more information, visit the UC Berkeley Urban Bee Lab at:

<http://www.helpabee.org/index.html>