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Bees in Your Garden

Attracting butterflies, hummingbirds and songbirds to your garden can be particularly rewarding. Welcoming these creatures adds elements of beauty and surprise to your yard while giving you the opportunity to learn about animals with who you share the outdoors. There is, however, one common garden inhabitant we either ignore or errantly try to eradicate – bees.

Bees have taken a lot of punishment from gardeners who are, understandably, concerned about being stung. But keep in mind that the majority of native bees (honeybees were imported from Europe) are solitary creatures with no hive to defend and, therefore, not aggressive and rarely sting. With that said, let's talk about why we want to invite native bees to our gardens.

Up to 80% of the world's flowering plants are pollinated by animals - some by bats, birds, butterflies, moths or wasps but the majority are pollinated by bees. Plants need to be pollinated before they can set seed or form fruit, both of which are important components in the diets of many birds and mammals, including humans. Fruits and seeds provide 15 – 30 % of the food and beverages that we consume. Unfortunately, due to habitat loss and overuse of pesticides, bees are in decline and, consequently, so is the production of fruit and seeds.

As gardeners we can help by considering native bees when choosing plants:

- select native plants. Research shows that native plants are up to 4 times more attractive to native bees than non-natives. If using non-natives, choose heirloom varieties of perennials and herbs because they typically produce more pollen and nectar than newer varieties;
- include a wide range of flower colors, especially blue, violet, white and yellow, as bees are most attracted to these colors;
- plant flowers in clumps because bees are most attracted to clumps of a single species. If possible, make your clumps four feet or wider in diameter;
- choose flowers of different shapes. There are almost 4,000 species of native bees and each has their own flower-shape preferences.

Here are a few forage plants for bees:

Aster *Aster*
Basil *Ocimum*
Black-eyed Susan *Rudbeckia*
Cotoneaster *Cotoneaster*
Currant *Ribes*
Elder *Sambucus*
English lavender *Lavandula*
Goldenrod *Solidago*
Hyssop *Agastache*
Joe-pye weed *Eupatorium*
Lupine *Lupinus*
Marjoram *Origanum*
Oregon grape *Berberis*
Penstemon *Penstemon*
Purple coneflower *Echinacea*
Rabbit-brush *Chrysothamnus*
Rhododendron *Rhododendron*
Rosemary *Rosmarinus*
Sage *Salvia*
Scorpion-weed *Phacelia*
Snowberry *Symphoricarpos*
Stonecrop *Sedum*
Sunflower *Helianthus*
Wild buckwheat *Eriogonum*
Wild-lilac *Ceanothus*
Willow *Salix*
Zinnia *Zinnia*

Providing nesting sites for solitary bees is just as important as providing nectar and pollen. If nesting sites are placed close to foraging areas you will attract more bees.

- Most solitary bees nest in holes in wood. You can provide nesting blocks, twig bundles or logs and snags.
- Ground nesting bees will appreciate patches of bare ground that are well-drained and in sunny sites.

Try to use pesticides as little as possible. If you must spray, be sure you have correctly identified the pest species and then use the right product for that species. Also, spray at the appropriate time of the pest species' life cycle. Read product labels carefully for the right time and amount to spray. Remember – pesticides kill the good guys, like bees and lady beetles, also.

For more information, especially details on creating nesting sites, see The Xerces Society at <http://www.xerces.org>.

If we learn about the natural roles of the creatures in our yards we can appreciate not just their beauty but also their ecological significance.