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Plant Flowers for Pollinators!

Flowers serve a much greater purpose than just decorating your landscape. Did you realize that planting flowers in your yard can help support local agriculture, ensure the availability of fruits and vegetables, and protect thousands of plant and animal species? All of this is true if you plant flowers that sustain pollinators, and the added bonus is they also make your yard more attractive.

Why Flowers Are Needed

Pollinators, which include bees, butterflies, moths, wasps, hummingbirds, and bats, make reproduction possible for more than three fourths of the flowering plants on earth, including many of the fruits and vegetables we eat every day. Without pollinators, local farmers and gardeners would struggle to grow blueberry, strawberries, tomatoes, squash, and many other fruits and vegetables. In addition, by pollinating flowering plants that are the foundation of food webs for myriads of insects, birds, mammals, and other animals, pollinators play a critical role in preserving local ecosystems and maintaining diverse natural communities.

Bees are the most prolific, efficient and productive pollinators in the world. While European honeybees are the most well known pollinators, North America also hosts an amazing variety of native bees, including bumble bees, sweat bees, miner bees, and mason bees. Populations of both honeybees and native bees have been declining over the last 50 years.

Reasons for bee decline include disease and parasite infection, habitat loss, and stress caused by pesticide exposure and poor nutrition. Bees gather nectar and pollen from flowers, to feed themselves and their offspring. To stay strong and maintain healthy colonies, bees need a season long supply of flowers that have not been contaminated with pesticides. As gardeners, we can play a critical role in reversing this alarming trend by planting pesticide free pollinator friendly flowers.

Pollinator Friendly Flowers

While honey bees are adapted to feed on a wide range of flowers, many of our native bees specialize in feeding on native plants. Including native plants in your landscape will support the widest range of pollinators. When selecting plants to support pollinators, look for varieties with single rather than double flowers, since the extra petals on double flowers can make it more difficult for bees to access pollen and nectar.

When designing plantings to support pollinators, aim to have at least three different types of flowers in bloom during each season, from early spring through late fall. Plant flowers in groups of at least 3 to 5 plants; this allows bees to forage more efficiently since they do not have far to move from one plant to the next. Using these principles to guide planting design will also make your yard an enticing habitat for beneficial insects and birds.

Flowering perennials are among the best nectar sources for bees. Recommended perennials native to the southeast that you are likely to find at local garden centers include early spring bloomers such as 'Homestead Purple' verbena, spiderwort (*Tradescantia* varieties), and *Coreopsis*, as well as late spring bloomers such as wild indigo (*Baptisia* species), beardtongue (*Penstemon* species), and bluestar (*Amsonia* species).

Great native summer blooming perennials rich in nectar include yellow and purple coneflowers (*Rudbeckia* and *Echinacea* species), *Phlox*, butterflyweed and milkweed (*Asclepias* species), Stoke's aster (*Stokesia laevis*), *Gaillardia*, *Liatris*, bee balm and horse mint (*Monarda* species). To attract an amazingly diverse array of pollinators, be sure to plant at least one type of Mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum* species). Mountain mints are a charming group of perennials available from native plant nurseries.

The nectar provided by late blooming flowers helps bolster bee colony strength to endure the winter. To provide late season nectar sources, plant a variety of native asters (*Symphotrichum* species), 'Fireworks' goldenrod (*Solidago* 'Fireworks'), coastal Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium dubium*), ironweeds (*Vernonia* species), and perennial sunflowers (*Helianthus* species).

To see images of hundreds of pollinator friendly plants, go to www.protectpollinators.org and click on the Pollinator Paradise Garden link. Check with your local Extension center or visit www.ncsu.edu/goingnative/ for more native plant recommendations suited to your area. To learn more about supporting pollinators in your yard, visit <http://pender.ces.ncsu.edu/pollinators/>.