

GARDENING

Better serve the bees' needs

Promote healthy bees, experts say, by planting plenty of food sources and avoiding pesticides.



This photo of a worker bee, taken by Roka Walsh of Springfield, tied for first place in Beyond Toxics' "Imagine a World Beyond Toxics" photo contest in 2012. Now is a great time to plant bee-friendly food sources in your garden. (Roka Walsh)

By Paul Omundson

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A major collapse of bee colonies, accelerating in the past decade, is hardly science fiction. “When I was born,” says Morris Ostrofsky, 65, a Lane County Master Gardener and beekeeper for 43 years, “there were 5 million colonies of bees in the United States. Now, it’s half that and continues to go down 20 to 30 percent each year.”

The exact cause is unknown. Culprits tend to be identified as a combination of things — pesticides, herbicides, fungus, climate changes and predators such as the Varroa mite, an exotic pest first seen in the United States in 1986 “and causing a lot of people to get out of beekeeping,” Ostrofsky says.

So far Lane County appears to have dodged the bullet. Chalk it up to abundance of natural food sources (summer blackberries especially) and a farsighted plan by local experts. Ostrofsky estimates that although local bee populations probably have declined, it is hardly noticeable — and there may be some areas where too many swarms compete for food.

Ten years ago, Lane County formed a strategy, says Ross Penhallegon, OSU Extension horticulturist in Eugene. “After a number of roundtables we decided there were too many opinions and too much differing information swirling around,” he says. “So we decided to just solve the problem.”

Their answer: Create 10-by-10-foot natural habitat areas planted with a wide range of pollinator plants, including flowers blooming early and late to sustain bees throughout their active cycle. This grassroots implementation of conservation biology was promoted and implemented through OSU Extension’s Lane County Master Gardener program.

“After just two to three years we saw noticeable success,” Penhallegon recalls. “Everyone who did this had massive amounts of honeybees, bumblebees, mason bees and other pollinators.” He adds: “Today, these 10-by-10 wild areas have become a major food source for them.”

What and when to plant

“Plant now,” Ostrofsky urges. “It’s a great time to add berries, tomatoes, zucchini, squash and artichokes to your garden, all good sources for bees to get nectar and pollen.”

He also recommends clover, globe thistle, pussy willows and a late summer plant, blue-flowered borage.

Pat Patterson, a graduate of the first Lane County Master Gardeners’ class in 1976, stresses that plant diversity is critical to sustaining a healthy pollinator population in your yard. That diversity means different sizes such as ground cover, short plants, woody plants, perennials, flowers, herbs and trees. “When you look at a yard that’s poorly designed,” Patterson notes, “it usually has only one or two kinds of plants.”

“Your goal is to offer a continuous supply of nectar and pollen for the bees,” she says. “The side benefit of a diverse garden is the beauty it brings, along with food to your table.”

Patterson’s advice for backyard diversity:

Minimize turf grass and promote ornamental grasses that produce a lot of small flowers.

Welcome pollinator-friendly weeds such as chickweed, bittercress, dandelions and wild daisies (“any plants in the daisy or carrot families are great,” Patterson says).

Set your yard up to bloom as much of the year as possible.

“That last one is especially important because bees need food from early spring to fall,” Patterson says. Her blooms start in December with plants in the witch hazel family and

winter camellias. Daffodils come in March; April brings rosemary blooms; and in May it's open season for just about everything. Rounding out the diversity should be plants, trees and shrubs with a long range of flowering times.

“What you want to do is create a food highway for the bees,” Patterson says. “If you and your neighbors plant a variety of flowering plants, there’s a nice food chain from yard to yard.” What bees don’t need, she adds, “is a person in the middle of that food highway using pesticides irresponsibly.”

One insecticide of concern is neonicotinoids, which can affect bees and other insects. “It doesn’t kill the bees outright,” Patterson says. “It makes the bee less efficient and more disoriented. It’s kind of an Alzheimer’s effect on them. It weakens the hive, and diseases and mites can move in better.”

“Even if people use a small amount, it sticks around and gets worse. It has a cumulative effect,” Ostrofsky warns.

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Healthy backyard bee resources

Beyond Toxics (beyondtoxics.org), a local nonprofit organization dedicated to “protecting public health and the environment from toxic pesticides,” partners with Eugene beekeepers Jen and Doug Hornaday in the Friends of Healthy Bees project. The Hornadays run a host-a-hive program dedicated to creating whole pesticide-free neighborhoods in the city to safeguard bee populations (healthybeeshealthygardens.com).

It remains unclear how much local bee populations have been affected by the colony collapse that has escalated nationwide over the past decade, and what factors — environmental toxins, predatory mites, climate change, etc. — are at play. But local beekeepers are participating in nationwide surveys to help answer these questions and develop solutions. Learn more about the surveys, and the effort to develop a “honeybee health database,” at beeinformed.org.

Among Lane County Master Gardeners’ classes is a sustainable landscape course that promotes healthy landscape ecosystems, free of toxins, that foster healthy populations of bees and other beneficial insects. The next session is April 24-25 in Eugene; see

details in the calendar (Page 19), call 541-344-5859 or visit extension .oregonstate.edu/lane/gardens.

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