



Plant a Pollinator Garden

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

It's unfortunate that many people find the adage, 'The only good bug, is a dead bug', comforting. While some species of insects are annoying, about 99 percent of insect species are either harmless or beneficial. Almost 80% of our food is dependent on pollinators in the form of mostly insects but some animals, like hummingbirds and bats, as well. That includes daily fixes like coffee and chocolate!

Pollinators include many species of insects including bees, hoverflies, butterflies, moths, wasps, fly species, hummingbirds, bats and honeyeaters. Almost all of these pollinators are threatened by human activities such as habitat loss, use of pesticides, and introduced diseases but also climate change. Loss of pollinators not only precludes reduced pollination but also reduction in biological diversity.



Photo by dmp2012.

Pollination involves the movement of pollen from one flower to another of the same species. It may be done by wind, in the case of corn or pine trees, water, or self-pollination, but most likely it is due to the efforts of pollinators, mainly insects. Pollinators need our help and even folks with small gardens or balconies can add plants that benefit the many species of pollinators.

Whether you have room for a pot or two on a porch or balcony, or oversee an acre or more of land, you can make a positive impact on our native pollinator populations. One key point to

remember is that native pollinators need native plants. While we have the modern tendency to measure time social media posts, plant and insect interactions have occurred over eons.

Our native pollinators gravitate towards our native plant species. They are essential for maintaining healthy local ecosystems. While they may be attractive to non-native plants, sometimes these plants do not offer enough pollen or offer larval host sites to these pollinators.

We as gardeners are torn. Who can resist that absolutely exquisite double flowering scabiosa or petunia even if they can't offer prolific nectar? Gardeners, the decision is yours. One drop in the bucket can be your aphorism. Each of us can make a small but imperative difference in helping to build up pollinator populations that we all depend on.

If you can't resist the allure of new gorgeous introductions, plant them in a small bed or containers where you can admire them all summer. In your more extensive garden beds, set in an abundance of plants for pollinators along with a few other plants of interest. Your gardening philosophy will direct you.

Those interested in maximizing pollinator species need to offer nectar producing plants from late winter through late fall. With derivations from normal seasons now becoming more prevalent, our native insects are as confused, as we are, and often observed looking for nectar sources later into the fall and earlier in the spring. Anything we can do to accommodate these unexpected climate trends would be appreciated by them.

To help our pollinators, there are two things to focus on that are of utmost importance. One is to plant as many native plants as possible. Our native pollinators have co-evolved over thousands of years with them. These plants have evolved to offer enticing nectar or other benefits to the pollinators which in turn serve to complete the fertilization process.

The second is to select plants attractive to pollinators from as early as possible in the growing season, like witch hazels, pussy willows, and early blooming bulbs throughout the summer and late into fall. This would support the greatest diversity of both pollinating insects and animals. Also, be cognizant that some pollinators operate at night so include night blooming plants like moon flower, night blooming primroses, chocolate daisies and others.

There are numerous annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees that support healthy pollinator populations. Many are commonly found in our vegetable, herb and ornamental gardens. Included in this list are squash, mints, basil, asters, sunflowers, milkweeds, goldenrods, asters, coneflowers, hyssops and many, many more. Look up local pollinator plants and fill your gardens with as many possible. Pollinators will be pleased and you'll be creating a more sustainable site for these essential and valuable creatures.

For more information on attracting pollinators or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.