

Help Bees in Your Yard



Native Bumblebee approaches Marsh/Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) Photo by Tom Sheley

Why are so many people asking how they can help bees?

It's because many know European Honey bees are historically known for pollination. Since their decline, native bees are playing a significant role in the pollination of flowers and crops that provide 1/3 of our food and drink. In addition to fruits and vegetables, bee-pollinated plants are used to make medicine, chocolate, vanilla, peppermint, coffee and wine.

Your small city garden can help native bees! Add beautiful plants to your garden, like the Swamp Milkweed pictured above in my front yard. Native bees have adapted to pure native plants (not cultivars or hybrids) to eat nectar, carry pollen, hide under leaves during storms and sleep on top of flowers.

For a bee plant list, enter your zip code at www.pollinator.org/guides.htm into the *Pollinator Coalition Guide*. Buy plants from a reputable organic or native plant dealer because some plants purchased at large retail stores contain pesticides that kill bees.

I include a variety of native plants that bloom at different times throughout the season in my yard. Here's a video from my yard of these important pollinators at work www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVX9RqCAbvU.

Learn to identify gentle native bees and wasps. Avoid swatting native bees because they rarely sting unless provoked. Bees buzz and eat only pollen. Wasps are carnivores. Most stings are from wasps that nest together to protect their hive. Search the Internet for photos, and check your yard for Yellow-jacket nests in the ground, Paper wasp nests under eaves or slats, and Hornet nests in trees (Kitchen scraps and garbage attract hornets.)

Yellow-jackets are the wasps that usually ruin picnics; however, Carpenter bees are gentle even though they buzz loudly. If Carpenter bees drill holes into your wood that cause problems, paint the wood with polyurethane in early spring when you first see them flying and before they lay their eggs.

Use yard maintenance techniques that do not kill bees. First, allow natural predators to control insects that damage plants in your yard instead of using chemicals. Second, practice organic lawn care. Apply a natural fertilizer ingredient, like corn gluten, to control pre-emergent broadleaf weeds in spring (~ 3/15 - 4/10) and in late fall (~ 8/15 - 9/10) in Ohio. Over-seed bare or weedy areas after rain has dissolved corn gluten (~ 5 weeks) with a natural drought and pest-resistant grass seed, like *TLC (Titan)*, available at most garden centers.

Sadly, most bee kills occur when bees pick up pesticides while pollinating plants. Even some organic products are toxic to bees. See page 2 in the Xerces Factsheet table at www.xerces.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/xerces-organic-approved-pesticides-factsheet.pdf. Contact your Public Health Dept. to opt out of having your yard sprayed for mosquitoes with chemicals that kill bees.

Provide clean water in a shallow dish, splash water on rocks that have a large indentation and spray leaves that can hold water (like the Cup Plant). Mud or sand puddles allow bees to drink safely and use the mud for nests. Use a small stick to pick native bees out of deeper bird baths where they can drown.

Create different kinds of nest sites as described at http://plants.usda.gov/pollinators/Enhancing_Nest_Sites_For_Native_Bee_Crop_Pollinators.pdf.

Drill holes in an old post or dead tree trunk to create nesting sites 3/32" to 3/8" in diameter and 4" to 5" deep. Leave some bare spots (no mulch, just soil) in your garden for soil-nesting native bees.

Scroll through *fact sheets* at www.xerces.org/fact-sheets/ for more details.

Share what you've learned with neighbors and friends, and post a *Certified Wildlife Habitat Sign* to explain what you are doing. Certify online at www.nwf.org/certify.

To learn more about backyard conservation, subscribe to our monthly 'Nature Scoop' email at www.backyardhabitat.info.

– Toni, Habitat Ambassador Volunteer