Gardening for Bees

Bees are nature’s premier pollinators. Their structure and feeding patterns uniquely suit them to efficiently move pollen between flowers, thus ensuring the growth of seeds, vegetables and fruits. Like all wildlife, bees are affected by the landscape and habitat diversity in their surroundings.

Three keys for bees:

(1) A variety of flowers with abundant nectar and pollen

(2) Nesting substrate for both soil and cavity nesting species

(3) Favorable landscape management.

Flower choice matters

Choose sun-loving plants and a location with 6-8 hours of sun per day.

Focus on native plants, which are more attractive to native bees than exotic plants. Avoid double flowers or plants advertised as “pollen free”.

Choose a range of flower colors. Bee favorites are blue, purple, violet, white and yellow. Some bees take pollen from only a few plant species. Generalists such as honey bees and bumble bees visit a wide variety of flowers.

Plant flowers in clumps of a single species. This is more attractive to bees than a scattering of single plants. When 8 or more species of bee plants are grouped together, they attract significantly more bees and a wider variety of bees.

Flowers should be grouped in patches or clumps to enhance the site’s attractiveness to bees.

Include flowers of different shapes. Bees have different tongue lengths, thus more shapes of flowers benefit different types of bees.

Give bees season-long bloom with the nectar and pollen they require.
**Bees love plants in these families:**

- **Asteraceae**—daisies, sunflowers, asters, coneflower, goldenrod, black-eyed Susan
- **Fabaceae**—the legumes, peas, clovers
- **Lamiaceae**—mints, lavender, salvia, bee balm
- **Rosaceae**—rose, apple, cherry, strawberry, raspberry
- **Scrophulariaceae**—snapdragon, penstemon

For early spring, maples, willows and even dandelions are important sources of nectar and pollen.

**Nesting guidelines:**

If a female bee encounters a blanket of turf, inches of mulch or a barrier of black plastic, she will go elsewhere to build her nest.

Thus it is important to leave areas of open soil, most native bees nest in the soil. Preferences vary, but many favor south-facing, sunny locations with sandy, well-drained soils.

About 30 percent of native bees nest in tunnels, such as abandoned Cheetah holes in wood, the hollow stem of plants, or natural cavity hollows.

PHOTO: Snags, or dead and dying trees provide great habitat for cavity-nesting bees.

**Landscape management**

Floral resources and nesting sites must be within the flight range of bees. Most native bees have a short flight distance ranging from 100 to several hundred feet.

Minimize all pesticide use and become bee friendly. Insecticides should only be applied on calm nights, when bees are not foraging.

Use bee-safe insecticides if pest control is necessary. Minimize herbicide use, as many “weedy” species provide valuable nectar and pollen resources for bees.

**The sting**

Male bees do not sting. Although female native bees are physically capable of stinging, normally they do not sting unless physically threatened or injured. Most bees native to the United States are solitary bees and unlike honey bees, do not have a colony to defend. To be safe, avoid disturbing any bee or insect nest. If you locate the nest of a ground-nesting bee, mark it with a stick so that it can be avoided.

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