

Year Round Gardening

Won't You Bee My Neighbor

Fredricka Bogardus, Colorado Master Gardener

Attracting bees to your garden can be a controversial topic. People tend to associate bees with stinging, although according to Whitney Cranshaw, an entomologist at Colorado State University, 95% of “bee stings” are probably attributable to Yellow Jacket wasps. Bees can sting, but are not aggressive unless the nest is disturbed or the bees are accidentally handled.

Honeybees, a European import to the Americas in the 17th century, are suffering a well-publicized decline due to colony collapse disorder. Native bees like bumble bees and solitary bees are suffering from habitat decline, and pesticide overuse. Bees are critical pollinators for our food supply. About 75% of our food supply depends on pollinated plants, including nuts, fruit, and vegetables.



Bee Hotel by Master Gardener Kerry Peetz

As gardeners we can make decisions which will improve the habitat for our native bees, and be welcoming to honeybees.

Bees need nectar for food, and pollen for royal jelly. Native plants tend to attract native bees. Use mass planting of flowering plants, which have white, yellow, blue and purple blooms to attract bees. Don't limit yourself to flowering herbaceous plants, flowering shrubs, and trees will also provide nectar and pollen. Avoid flowers that have been bred to have frilly petals, often

double or triple varieties. Bees cannot get into these blooms to gather pollen and nectar. Make sure your landscape has some plants blooming the entire growing season.

Try to minimize pesticide use in your garden. Most garden bugs are beneficial, many destructive bugs can be controlled by mechanical means, picking off the plants, using floating row covers, spraying off aphids with a stream of water. Use chemical controls only when absolutely necessary.

Bumble bees make nests in the ground, sometimes in abandoned rodent habitats. Leave some space uncultivated if possible. Other solitary bees, nest in detritus left in the garden, be a little messy to attract these creatures. If your soil is high in clay keep some of it un-mulched for bees to build nests.

Consider building an insect hotel for solitary bees and other beneficial insects. Mason bees, prolific pollinators, build mud partitioned nests in existing cavities. Drill some holes in a block of wood, the holes should be 1/4 to 3/8 inch in diameter and about 6 inches in depth to encourage them. Other suitable cavities might be bamboo, or straw bundles. These habitats can be simple, or a work of art.

For a list of plants that are helpful to bees check out
'Gardening for Bees- or not!' By Whitney Cranshaw at
<http://bspm.agsci.colostate.edu/files/2013/03/Bees-in-the-Garden-Handout.pdf>.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research based answers. Get answers to your horticulture questions by visiting ask.extension.org or by calling a Colorado Master Gardener Volunteer at 520-7684, 9:00 to 12:00 Monday – Thursday.