The Importance of Bee's

by Valerie Wylie

We are becoming increasingly aware that many of our native pollinators and domesticated bee populations are declining. Threatened by habitat loss, disease and pesticides which kills pollinators when sprayed directly or contaminates plants on which they forage. The contaminated flowers, pollen and nectar is brought back to the nest for the young, affecting the next generation. It is vital to not use any pesticides. Pollinators including bees, butterflies, beetles, hummingbirds and certain bats are essential for pollinating our crops and plants which increases crop yield as well as healthy ecosystems. 80% of flowering plants are dependent on pollinators to help them transfer their pollen.

Bees are the most important pollinators, both native and domesticated. Although the Honey Bee is not native to Canada, having been introduced from Europe approximately 400 years ago, they are not as effective as some of our native bees such as the Bumble Bee or Mason Bee. Our native bees also emerge earlier than the Honey Bee which is extremely important for pollinating early spring blossoms including certain fruit trees. The Honey Bee, however, is highly valued for its production of honey, beeswax and other products.

We can help by planting pollinator friendly plants in our own yards as well as providing water, shelter and nesting sites for them. There are different nesting preferences for different species of bees. While we are all familiar with the Honey Bee nesting in hives, our native bees prefer building nests in the ground or in trees and shrubs. 70% of the 4,000 bee species native to North America have a spot tunneled into the ground while the rest nest in dead trees or shrubs with pithy stems such as elderberry, raspberry or sumac. Many of our native bees will also happily take up residence in provided bee houses.

Provide fresh water in a shallow dish or bird bath with partially submerged stones which act as landing pads or perches.

To create a pollinator friendly garden, select a sunny sheltered area and amend the soil with compost as needed to get your plants off to a healthy start. Pollinators such as bees and butterflies require a constant source of food from spring when they emerge through to fall. Therefore, it is necessary to have plants blooming the entire season. Choose plants of different heights including trees, shrubs, vines and perennials in a wide variety of flowers, shapes and sizes. More colour diversity will also attract an extensive array of pollinators. Bees especially like blue, purple, violet, yellow and white while butterflies are partial to bright colours such as red, yellow, blue and purple. Hummingbirds are drawn to scarlet, orange and red. Plant in clusters of 3 to 5 covering an area approximately 4' in diameter.

Consider leaving part of your yard a little wild as many weeds are a good source of food. For example, Dandelions, which provide nectar in the early spring when few other flowers are open. Milkweed is the host plant for the Monarch butterfly and other plants in the same family are excellent nectar providers.

Some good plant choices for early spring include Apple trees, Serviceberry, Viburnum, Violets, Alliums and Crocus. For summer choose from Clematis, Lupines, Monarda (Bee Balm), Penstemon, Beard Tongue, Echinacea (Coneflower), Lavender, Achillea (Yarrow), Sea Thrift, Nepeta (Cat Mint), Borage, Ascelpias (Butterfly Weed & Milkweed) & Chives. For late summer through fall select from Asters, Rudbeckia (Black Eyed Susan), Agastache (Hyssop), Joe Pye Weed, Golden Rod, Sunflowers and many varieties of Sedum (Stonecrop). Most of the above plants have the added benefit of being drought tolerant but only once established.

For help with selecting these or other pollinator plants, come in to talk to our Garden Centre Professionals.