

This Spring, Give Bees a Chance

By Amanda Goble

Spring is prime time for gardening and landscaping. Whether you grow backyard veggies, maintain your own ornamental landscaping, or hire a service to maintain the perfect lawn, spring is probably the most beautiful time of year for your property. And you're not the only one who appreciates great landscaping: spring is when bees and other friendly pollinators are most active. These beneficial bugs are busy doing their part to keep the local environment and your landscape healthy.

Spring isn't a walk in the park for pollinators, though. The choices you make when maintaining your lawn and garden—especially what chemical products you use—can make or break the season for bees, butterflies and other beneficial bugs. Here's why pollinators matter and what you can do to help them have a successful spring.

A *pollinator* is any animal that helps flowering plants make seeds. Honey bees are the most famous pollinators, spreading pollen from flower to flower as they collect nectar. Butterflies and moths are also well-known pollinators, but any other insects also do their share to help plants reproduce. Pollinating insects, like bees, are must-have actors in any healthy landscape. Without them, most plants and trees wouldn't be able to make seeds, and the supermarket produce aisle would look pretty empty. Pollinators are also a crucial food for the songbirds that visit your backyard bird feeder, especially at this time of year when there are nestlings to feed.

But times are hard on bees and other pollinators. Lawn grass and ornamental plants take the place of native plants but don't offer the same nutritious nectar, making it tough for bees and butterflies to make ends meet. Even going to work is dangerous for pollinators because, when they do find flowers, they often encounter an invisible, deadly threat: pesticide. Backyard poisonings are a serious threat to hardworking pollinators, whose numbers are on the decline.

Most of us wouldn't spray a butterfly or bee on purpose. The trouble is, common products advertised to help you grow the perfect garden or lawn have a serious hidden cost in the form of poisoned pollinators. Most chemicals used in the landscape can't tell butterflies from bean beetles and kill all the insects that contact them. Pollinators that live in family groups, like honey bees, take additional damage from pesticides because foraging bees may bring poisoned material back to the home and give it to their younger sisters. Entire colonies of honey bees—a beekeeper's livelihood—can be lost this way.

There is good news, though. By being a smart consumer, you can save bees from having a bad day *and* maintain a great landscape. Pollinator-protecting choices can also be great for your wallet. Here are the most important steps you can take to give bees a chance:

First, take a look at what products are being used in your landscape. What chemicals do you use on the lawn or garden, and for what purpose? If you hire a company for lawn maintenance, ask them what they're using on your property and how often. For each pest killer, herbicide or fertilizer, check the fine print and make sure it's being applied exactly as stated on the directions. Applying products in the wrong location or concentration can put your pollinator crew in danger.

If you discover you are using chemicals that are dangerous to pollinators, like pesticides, consider whether you could trim those products from your lawn care

routine. Is the chemical addressing a real problem, or was it marketed to you as a preventative? Try going pesticide-free for a season and compare. Chances are, your landscape will be just as healthy without it, and so will your wallet.

Pests do become a problem occasionally. Not all bugs are bad, and even pest insects are usually important in your backyard environment as food for other animals—but in rare cases, control is necessary to save a vegetable harvest or a valuable ornamental plant. You can take action while giving bees a chance, however. Visit a high-quality garden center or contact the county extension office for advice on the least pollinator-toxic products for your specific pest control needs. When it's time to deploy the chemicals, apply them at night or just before sunrise. This gives them a chance to work on the pests while bees and butterflies are asleep.

You can give pollinators an extra boost, and make landscape maintenance easier, with a few simple changes and attractive landscape additions. Lawn grass takes time and money to maintain, but doesn't offer anything to hardworking pollinators. Expanding the planted areas of your property and adding easy, low-maintenance perennials and shrubs reduces your lawn maintenance needs while creating the ultimate backyard destination for butterflies and other beneficials.

Along the same lines, native plants are usually healthier options for pollinators than non-native or heavily cultured plants. Many ornamental flowers look flashy but don't offer any food for the bees. There's a huge variety of native plants available, and they come with the added bonus of being very low maintenance with fewer pest problems than non-native plants. Native trees, shrubs and flowers keep pollinator species healthy while giving your landscape an attractive appearance.

There are big benefits to looking out for your backyard bees and butterflies. Bountiful vegetable harvests, bigger blooms and abundant songbirds are a nice trade for pesticides and other chemicals. Using fewer chemicals on your property saves money at a time when every little bit counts, and it simply feels good to know that as you relax on your porch or deck and watch your pollinators hard at work that this spring you gave bees a chance.

Amanda Goble is a North Carolina Certified Beekeeper and active member of the Crystal Coast Beekeeping Association and Eastern Apicultural Society. She keeps backyard bees for fresh local honey, natural beeswax and the joy of caring for a large family of fuzzy, buzzing, golden girls.

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