

Friday's Feature

By

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BEE aware of the role of pollinators

Insects pollinate more than 95 crops grown in the U.S. These crops are worth more than \$19 billion, and they could not be grown without their insect pollinators. Worldwide, approximately 1,000 plants grown for food, beverages, fibers, spices and medicines need to be pollinated by insects and other animals in order to produce the goods on which we depend.

June 24-30, 2007, is Pollinator Week. It's a time to emphasize the importance of pollinators and the obstacles now facing our most important pollinator, the honey bee.

The honey bee is just one of the many kinds of bees endemic to Florida. However, it is the most important bee to Florida agriculture and to the United States as a whole. The honey bee is credited with approximately 85% of the pollinating activity necessary to supply about one-third of the nation's food supply.

Pollinators, including honey bees are declining in number. Factors which have contributed to declines include: improper use of pesticides and herbicides, loss of habitat, aggressive competition from non-native species, diseases, predators, and parasites.

Now a new problem threatens the bee, and it may eclipse altogether the bee maladies of old. Termed "colony collapse disorder" (CCD), the disorder has gained considerable national and international attention.

Home gardeners everywhere can do their part in encouraging pollinators by creating a pollinator-friendly habitat.

Pollinators require two essential components in their habitat: somewhere to nest and flowers from which to gather nectar and pollen. Pollinators, but especially bees, are more attracted to native plants than exotics. "Natives" occur naturally in a specific region.

Select old-fashioned varieties of flowers whenever possible. Many hybrid ornamental varieties with their larger and showier flowers have reduced pollen and nectar. If you do use non-native plants, choose ones that don't spread easily, since these could become invasive. Design your garden so that there is a continuous succession of plants flowering from spring through fall.

Avoid the use of pesticides. If you must use them, use the most selective and least toxic ones. For example, Sevin® is one of the nation's most widely used insecticides for a wide variety of insect pests. It is also one of the most toxic to honey bees in certain formulations with dusts being more hazardous than liquid formulations.

If pesticides are used, apply them at dusk when pollinators are least active. Bees fly when the air temperature is above 55-60 degrees F and are most active from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Create a home for pollinators by supplying a water source. Several species of butterflies, another important pollinator group, are attracted to free-standing puddles. They not only benefit from a drink but also utilize salts and breakdown products of decaying vegetation which is present in most puddles.

To keep your puddles from becoming a source of mosquitoes, bury a shallow potted plant saucer to its rim in an area receiving full sun in the butterfly garden. Fill the saucer with coarse pine bark or stones and fill to overflowing with water. The butterflies are able to drink from the cracks between the pine bark pieces or the stones while the mosquito larvae have a difficult time becoming established.

Some gardeners are apprehensive about attracting pollinators, especially bees, to the garden. Many pollinators, like butterflies, are beautiful additions to the garden. Bees generally only use their stinger in defense.

Bees and other pollinators are a critical part of natural environments and they provide a valuable service to humans when they pollinate our fruits, vegetables and flowers. Without pollinators, we may not have chocolate, coffee, melons, peaches, pumpkins, vanilla, almonds and many more foods we enjoy.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>