



The bright, large flower heads of sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) present a nectar and pollen mother lode for pollinators.

PHOTO BY MELISSABEES.COM

Feeding the bees

Growing a broad palette of bee-friendly plants benefits pollinators and ultimately humans

By Kym Pokorny

As bees flitter from plant to plant, they entertain us, make honey for our table and fill the garden with flowers.

Most significantly, bees feed us.

Farmers rely heavily on honeybees to pollinate crops. An extreme example: California's almond industry depends 100 percent on rented hives.

But bees are in decline. The number of managed colonies has decreased 50 percent since the 1940s, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which cites problems such as increased pests and diseases, the possible effects of pesticides and the lack of diversity of pollen and nectar sources.

These negative factors make gardens with bee-friendly plants essential in Melissa Elliott's eyes. If we don't get with

the program, "We'll be eating gruel," said the owner of Melissa Bees, a landscape design, install and maintenance business in White Salmon, Washington.

Bees love trees and a whole lot more

Providing a diversity of plants that cover a long bloom season is key, said Elliott, who also runs a bee business and keeps her own hives.

That shouldn't be hard to do, said Jen Hardin-Tietjen, general manager of Forestfarm, the mail-order nursery with the familiar thick catalog. "All the same plants that attract us are going to attract bees."

Since bees get out and about when the temperatures move into the high 40s, Elliott said it's essential to plant early-bloomers, including trees such as hazels

(*Corylus*), oaks, willows and maples.

"I don't think people are aware that bees love trees," Elliott said. "It's a missed opportunity for attracting pollinators. Honeybees' natural home is in the cavity of trees. They also provide a lot of nectar and pollen."

Fruit trees are a natural for pollinators, but Elliott also suggested Washington hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*), a small specimen with striking fall color, glossy red fruit and clusters of white flowers that make bees swoon.

Then there are the elderberries, including *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace' with its finely cut ebony foliage and showy 6-inch domes of fluffy, light pink flowers. And while she's talking trees, Elliott is quick to add disease-resistant crabapples to the list: yellow-fruited ▶

'Golden Raindrops' is at the top of her list.

Hardin-Tietjen also called attention to sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*), a far-too-unknown small- to medium-sized tree with raindrops of white flowers dripping from long stems and traffic-stopping red fall color.

Bushes for bees

On a sunny day in winter, you'll see bees — including important natives — on heather (*Erica*), hellebores, winter honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*), manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), a whole gamut of winter hazel species (*Corylopsis*) and Hardin-Tietjen's favorite, Chinese paper bush (*Edgeworthia papyrifera* and *E. chrysantha*).

"*Edgeworthia* like 'Nanjing Gold' and 'Red Dragon' are very showy with bright flower clusters that appear on bare stems in February to April," she said. "And the



Bees swoon for the sweetly fragrant — reminiscent of root beer, according to some — flowers of *Clethra alnifolia* 'Vanilla Spice'.

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flowers smell just like honey.”

Flowering currants are also bee magnets. Golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) is a western native with swinging clusters of yellow flowers scented with the fragrance of cloves and vanilla. The better-known *Ribes sanguineum* drips with flowers in shades of pink, red and white. ‘Elk River Red’, a very early bloomer, and ‘Pulborough Scarlet’ are two she recommends.

A mid-season shrub that attracts bees is the intensely fragrant summer-sweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), said Hardin-Tietjen, who likes the cultivars ‘Vanilla Spice’ and ‘Ruby Spice’.

“Some of our crew describe the scent of these undemanding shrubs as root beer,” she said. “However you think of it, these are very adaptable plants in most garden conditions and do well in shade.”

Native plants for native pollinators

Trillium Gardens owner Sheila Klest concentrates on native plants, which have a correlation to native pollinators.

“Some pollinators are generalists, and some pollinators are specialists,” she said.

“And for the specialists, you need native plants in order to provide the nectar and pollen they need. They’ve evolved together, so it’s really very connected.”

Klest is an advocate of hedgerows or shrub borders that attract all sorts of bees, as well as other insects and wildlife. One combination she recommended incorporates multi-stemmed vine maple (*Acer circinatum*), white-flowering ninebark (*Physocarpus capitatus*), sweetly scented Lewis’ mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*), red twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) and snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) weaving through.

To that mixture she might add Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) for its early, bright yellow blooms, or serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) for the mass of fragrant, white flowers followed by edible berries. The mixture of flowers, colorful bark and varying textures makes for a border that draws the eye as well as pollinators.

Bees eat up edible gardens

For any bee-friendly garden, herbs are a must.

“In my experience, bees really, ▶



Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) provides a bouquet of aromatic flowers that attract bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators to the garden.

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really go for herbs," said Leigh Geschwill, co-owner of the third-generation F & B Farms and Nursery in Woodburn.

"Maybe it's the fragrance combined with the nectar. Look at lavender. Mine is always covered."

Rosemary is another heady plant for pollinators, and a pot starring an assortment of thymes — don't leave out lemon thyme — will keep bees coming back for more. Oregano, which has the advantage of blooming early and long, is another magnet. "Keep cutting it and it keeps blooming," Geschwill said.

Vegetables are no small shakes when it comes to feeding bees. They love stumbling into the big blooms of squash, melons and cucumbers, and won't say no to a meal of tomatoes, peppers, eggplants or greens that are left to flower. But, most of all, you can't talk about bees without talking about fruit, said Geschwill, who was eager to point out the benefits of golden raspberries.

"There's not a fruit crop out there that bees don't love," she said, "but I happen to love golden raspberries. They bloom in spring and fall, which is good for the bees, and you get two crops. And

since they have flowers in fall, you get something out there when it's needed."

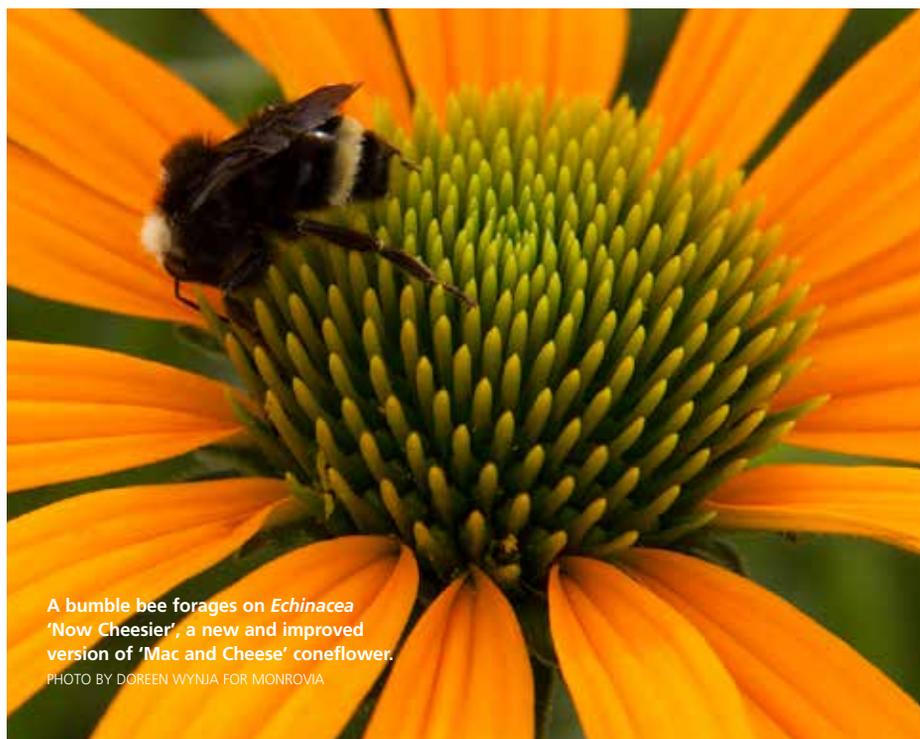
Flower power

In summer, bees go to town on just about anything flowering in the garden.

Geschwill has had particularly good luck with the tubular flowers of perennial *Penstemon* and annual snapdragon. "They both bloom forever, and have really bright colors of purples and pinks and spotting or variegation on the throats. They're bright and attractive."

Sunflowers, *Echinacea*, annual cosmos and *Coreopsis* bloom throughout summer and draw bees like honey draws bears. The blue blossoms of hardworking Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) and *Caryopteris* can't be overlooked, and it's hard to beat the panicles of Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium*). "You will find every kind of bee on that plant," Geschwill said. "It's crazy."

In late spring and summer, Klest likes to see a profusion of native wildflowers planted in drifts in a border. Perhaps bright yellow Oregon sunshine (*Eriophyllum lanatum*) mixed with rose checker mallow (*Sidalcea virgata*), a



A bumble bee forages on *Echinacea* 'Now Cheesier', a new and improved version of 'Mac and Cheese' coneflower.

PHOTO BY DOREEN WYNJA FOR MONROVIA



A light scent of vanilla wafts from the spectacular white flowers with dark burgundy anthers of Vancouver™ 'Fragrant Star' clematis.

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little plant with rose-pink blooms that bears a resemblance to hollyhock. Throw in some purple Oregon geranium (*Geranium oregonum*), and you and the bees are good to go.

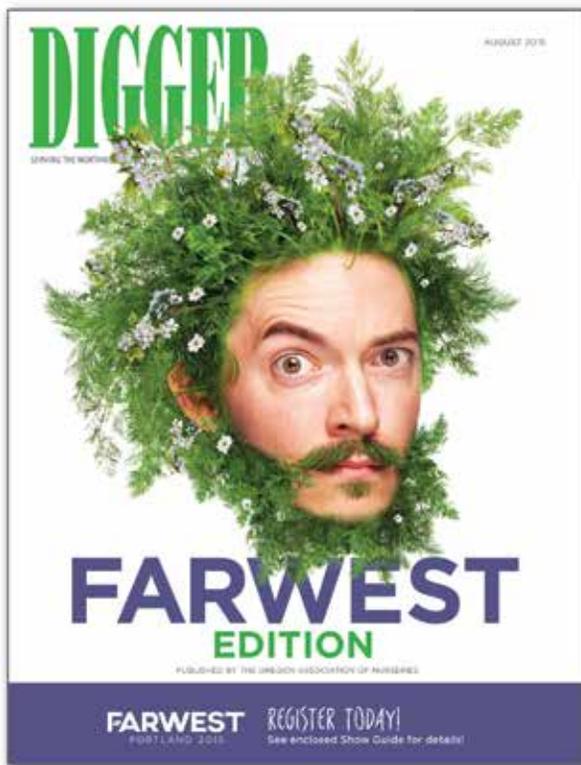
Fall foraging

Whereas summer is a smorgasbord for bees, fall can be an almost empty table. Not only do gardens start to wind down, agricultural crops are done blooming, too.

"All of a sudden, there's nothing there for the honeybees," Geschwill said. "So we're making food available to them — native pollinators, too. If they have food, they can reproduce and make it through winter."

For fall, she speaks highly of sedums for their long bloom season. The tall, fleshy types, such as *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy', are fine, but she loves

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the ground cover versions like *Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina'. Its tiny, needle-like yellow leaves and similarly colored flowers give it distinction, and it will grow just about anywhere in sun, including spilling over pots or tucked into crevices. Poor soil doesn't affect it at all.

There's also Oregon native *Sedum spathulifolium* 'Cape Blanco', known by its tiny, tight rosettes of almost white topped with yellow spikes of star-shaped flowers.

"Asters are always great in fall, too," Geschwill said. "I find them simple to grow. You forget about them, and then they show up and you say, 'Oh, that's what that green thing was.' And you've got the whole spectrum of pink and blue. They fare well with late-summer sunflowers and black-eyed Susans. They go nicely with *Gaillardia*, too."

When it comes to unusual plants, Hardin-Tietjen enjoys introducing gardeners to seven son flower (*Heptacodium miconioides*), a large shrub/small tree that flowers in late summer to early fall when many flowering plants are done for the season. The white flower clusters provide plenty of forage for bees and, as a bonus, rosy-red calyces hold on well into fall and peeling bark gives it winter appeal.

Another plant she loves for bees — and gardeners — is sweet olive (*Osmanthus heterophyllus*), particularly the cultivars 'Goshiki', which is variegated yellow and green; 'Gulf tide', one of the hardiest; and white-streaked 'Kembu'. All have glossy evergreen leaves and are clothed in tiny, white, star-shaped flowers that are highly fragrant.

Cultivating bee-friendly gardens is a win-win, the four women agree.

"We can't live without bees, and they can't live without us," Elliott said. "They need the food we can provide. It's not hard. Besides, bee-friendly plants make beautiful gardens." ☺

Kym Pokorny is a freelance writer specializing in gardening and the nursery industry. She can be reached at madrona29@yahoo.com.