

Sustaining pollinators

It is estimated that pollinators are responsible for one out of every three bites of food we eat each day. Honeybees alone contribute more than \$15 billion to our U.S. food production.

When we think of pollinators, honeybees often come to mind first, and while they are the most important pollinators, there are many others. Pollination can occur by other insects, the wind, many birds, and also when people and animals brush against plants.

In the bird pollinator category, we probably do not often think of hummingbirds as being good pollinators, but like bees, hummingbirds actually get into the flower and come in contact with the pollen, which they then carry to another flower. Nevertheless, when we consider all of the different pollinators, honeybees are the most efficient.

In recent years, honeybee populations — both managed hives and wild bees — have been dying off. There are many causes cited, with three in particular that we hear about most frequently: the *Varroa* mite, agricultural pesticides and a loss of habitat.

While gardeners do not have much control over mites, they do have control over what chemicals they spray on their plants and they can help spread the word about those products that are especially toxic to honeybees.

Gardeners can also somewhat control the loss of habitat for honeybees. They can help improve the health and numbers of honeybees and other pollinators by providing more nectar and pollen sources in the selection of the plants they purchase for their garden.

Building buzz

This past June, in an unprecedented collaboration, dozens of conservation and gardening organizations joined together to form the National Pollinator Garden Network.

This joint effort launched a new nationwide campaign — the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge — designed to accelerate the growing pollinator-friendly movement across

*What I'm
Hearing*

**Mike
Darcy**



the United States, which culminated in President Barack Obama's call to action to reverse the decline of pollinating insects such as honeybees, native bees and the monarch butterfly.

The Million Pollinator Garden Challenge is a rallying call to hundreds of thousands of gardeners, horticultural professionals, schools and volunteers to



help reach the goal of a million pollinator gardens over the next two years.

A pollinator garden consists of plants that attract pollinators, and it does not have to be large to have a big effect. Every garden of any size counts, from window boxes, community gardens, backyard gardens and front yards, to farm borders, golf courses, school gardens, corporate and university cam-

pus, and city parks. No matter where we live, work or play, we can, with little effort, offer essential food and shelter for pollinators.

For a retail garden center, this is an excellent opportunity to jump on the bandwagon and create displays of pollinator-friendly plants. Actually, this has already happened in some garden centers. I have seen signage referring to "Plants to attract honeybees" and "Plants to attract hummingbirds."

While this is certainly valuable information for the customer, perhaps this concept should be taken even further and a pollinator-friendly garden actually created on site. I am convinced that many garden center customers would like the concept of a pollinator-friendly garden, but they may hesitate because they do not know what to plant. Gardening can be intimidating to many people. Actually showing them an example of a pollinator-friendly garden might all the inspiration and motivation they need to create their own.

Another pollinator-friendly concept for garden centers would be to create space where a beehive could be placed with plants around it. Such a display could inspire many gardeners to build one in their own yard. While there may be concerns about liability, installing some type of barrier, such as a fence or plexiglass, should suffice to keep customers a safe distance away.

Two years ago, we hosted an open garden attended by more than 500 people. They all walked down our driveway, with a beehive less than six feet away from the main pathway. No one was stung and the hive was quite a conversation piece. Visitors commented on what a novel idea it was and how nice it looked. Of course, it was painted yellow to match the golden hop vine behind it!

When guests visit our garden, many question the fact that the hive is in a setting with human activity so close to it. Unless they are disturbed, honeybees tend to be non-aggressive and are more interested in going after a ▶

flower than a person.

Garden centers interested in this idea should contact their local beekeepers association. They can provide a wealth of information regarding placement of the hive. It is also possible that a member would be willing to set up the hive and help maintain it.

Beyond bees

The possibilities for retail sales can extend well beyond just pollinator-friendly plants.

Bees need a water source, for instance, and a birdbath, water bowl or fountain would be a perfect tie-in.

And don't forget about the gardener with very limited space. A balcony, deck, or small patio is room enough for pollinator-friendly plants in containers, whether they house a single plant or a grouping. Many herbs, basil in particu-

lar, are extremely attractive to bees.

Many articles have been written about the decline of monarch butterflies and the need to try to increase their sources of food. Attracting them to Pacific Northwest gardens can be more difficult than honeybees, which, in limited numbers, are almost always present. Monarch butterflies have a very limited palate, and that limits their range. But what a treat it is to have one come to a garden!

Monarch butterflies need a source of milkweed to lay their eggs on and then the larval stage feeds on the plant. Often the word milkweed conjures up negative images, but *Asclepias*, often called butterfly weed, is a garden-worthy plant and can be found in some garden centers.

Salem gardeners Dave and Pat Eckerdt grow *Asclepias* and it does

indeed attract monarch butterflies into their garden. The old adage "if you plant it, they will come" certainly worked for them. I think this would be a new plant for most gardeners and, with the right display explaining what it can do, could generate new sales.

The possibilities for a retail garden center are endless, but I think next spring a commitment to creating a display of bee, butterfly and hummingbird plants would be a huge asset. Also, a garden center could promote the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge and create interest in this campaign. We can all accept this challenge. ☺

Mike Darcy is the host of "In the Garden with Mike Darcy," a radio program airing at 9 a.m. Saturdays on KXL 101 FM in Portland. He can be reached at itmikedarcy@comcast.net.

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