

Accepting the pollinator challenge

The Million Pollinator Garden Challenge is a new campaign encouraging the public to help create a stable and sustaining food supply for pollinators by planting more trees, shrubs and flowers.

The goal is a good one and something that the nursery and greenhouse industry ought to get behind. In fact, it is a fantastic opportunity for all segments of our industry — growers, retailers and landscapers. After all, our green products are the building blocks for the full recovery of the bee population and other pollinators.

Our national association, AmericanHort, is one of eight founding organizations partnering in this campaign. At a recent meeting of the various state nursery association executives, AmericanHort made the case that a concerted effort amongst all the partners — including state green industry organizations such as ours — will increase nectar- and pollen-providing landscapes of every size.

The end result will be an expanded network of gardens and forage for bees.

This is a welcome and positive step to solve an underappreciated aspect of pollinator health. It expands on prior efforts by many organizations that have been working hard over the past several years to educate consumers and agricultural sectors.

We've worked behind the scenes to prioritize research and incentives for bee health. And, we have brought together agriculture, beekeepers, garden clubs and conservation groups to engage on increasing the populations of native and honey bees along with monarch butterflies.

The emphasis on pollinator forage and habitat is a welcome shift in focus. Up to now, the pollinator debate has focused primarily on pesticides. Don't get me wrong — that discussion should still continue. However, we should not forget that mites, nutrition (forage) and genetic diversity within the managed bee population

are critical components of the issue.

Oregon State University, particularly through the work of Dr. Ramesh Sagili, is working toward a state-of-the-art bee health diagnostic facility as part of an integrated pollinator health research plan.

'When flowers bloom, so does hope'

This push to promote pollinator health can thank the efforts of former first lady Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson for paving the way, so to speak. She became known as the Environmental First Lady due to her commitment to conservation and highway beautification. Upon becoming first lady, she launched a beautification project in Washington, D.C. "When flowers bloom, so does hope," she said.

She also worked closely with the American Association of Nurserymen to encourage the planning and planting of wildflowers along the nation's highways.

A further step was taken when the administration of President Lyndon Johnson ushered through the Highway Beautification Act of 1965, which was more commonly called the Lady Bird Bill. While the bill was about more than planting flowers, the effort of connected beauty and environmental function should not be underestimated, nor its impact on the pollinator community dismissed.

As a result of Lady Bird's leadership, communities nationwide began to invest in what we now call green infrastructure. They saw it as a way to improve life, reduce crime and create clean air and water. Her continuing influence can be seen with the Plant Something campaign.

A natural evolution of the former first lady's dedication is found in the 279-acre Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, on the outskirts of Austin, Texas. Opened in 1995 and dedicated in 1998, it includes more than 700 plant species, and contains educational components that are appropriate for children as well as adults.

Public provides greatest impact

Research suggests that undernourished or malnourished bees appear to be



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more susceptible to pathogens, parasites and other stressors, including pesticides.

Add to that the diet and nutrition issue, apiary overcrowding and the competition between honey bees and native bees, and it's not surprising that these stressors can have a significant impact on colony longevity. Invasive species have also contributed to pollen or nectar scarcity.

The Obama administration and leading states like Oregon recognize that bees need better forage and a variety of plants to support colony health.

Federal and state programs are being evaluated to target land management strategies that maximize available food sources. However, the biggest impact can be triggered by the public and their love for plant material. Over the next two years, the network of partners will work hard to establish one million gardens to assist in restoring critical pollinator habitat in the United States.

Every garden created in America can help. Public, botanical and youth garden projects, business areas and government offices are eligible for monetary incentives if they join the network. But whether or not they formally join the program, every neighbor can make a difference and provide nutrition for our honey and native bees.

There is little debate about the role and importance of pollinators to the nursery and greenhouse industry. The industry's garden centers and landscapers are the perfect conduit to provide the general public the tools they need to be part of the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge. We are the green industry — the perfect partner for this goal. ©