



# Plants for pollinators

Strong consumer interest drives demand for pollinator friendly plant selections

BY KYM POKORNY

**A**S BEES AND OTHER pollinators decline, the importance of building habitat in home gardens, parks, fields and commercial properties has edged into the public consciousness.

Wholesale and retail nurseries can benefit from the market demand for plants that attract and nourish bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

“Pollinator plants have definitely increased in popularity among end consumers in the past five years or so,” said Crystal Cady, account manager for **Skagit Gardens Inc.** “The big turning point was when there were several instances in the Pacific Northwest where bees and other pollinators were dying from spray incidents.”

One of those cases was five years ago — coincidentally during National Pollinator Week — when 50,000 native bumble bees fell dead in a Target store parking lot in Wilsonville, Oregon. It happened after linden trees in bloom, which were covered in the bees, were sprayed with a neonicotinoid pesticide.

The incident made international news and infuriated a public already concerned about the plight of honeybees because of issues with mites, diseases, pesticides and loss of nutrition and habitat. Although it was a catalyst for change, the issue of pollinator decline was already well entrenched by then.

In 2006, beekeepers began noticing losses of their hives. As numbers reached the 30 percent mark, the trend became known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) and the race was on to determine the cause.

Currently, bee deaths are decreasing and — though at a big expense — beekeepers can replace their hives. Research is still ongoing, including at Oregon State University’s Bee Lab, where Ramesh Sagili, director of the lab, works to bring certainty to the cause of CCD, which he attributes to a cluster of factors coming together to create a perfect storm.

Meanwhile, as people react to the decline of the charismatic honeybee, Oregon’s estimated 500 native bees are far less noticed.

“Most people think of honeybees, but we have a lot of native bumble bees and other bees that get lost in the shuffle,” said Richie Steffen, director of the Elisabeth C. Miller Garden in Seattle. “People just don’t know about the solitary, little bees.”

Because native bumblebees were the victims of the parking lot spraying, awareness is growing and the nursery industry is stepping up.

Led by Executive Director Jeff Stone, the Oregon Association of Nurseries has connected with the inter-agency Oregon Bee Project, a collaboration of OSU Extension Service, the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the Oregon Department of Forestry for research, education and outreach about bee conservation. The project was undertaken by mandate of the Oregon Legislature.

From the get-go, Stone believes the OAN stepped up to participate in the task force that led to the formation of the program.

“Our industry relies on strong pollinator activity,” Stone said. “It’s in our interest to make sure pollinators are thriving. We want to be a helpful voice.”



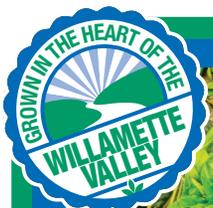
### Feeding on interest in bees

On a more individual level, growers and retail operations can profit from the intense interest in pollinator plants. At

**Blooming Junction** — the retail arm of wholesale perennials grower **Blooming Nursery** in Cornelius, Oregon — customers come in specifically looking for

plants friendly to bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

“Every day, people ask,” owner Grace Dinsdale said. “They’re looking >>



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**A native wish list for bees**

Following is a list of native, pollinator-friendly plants that Mary Logalbo, urban conservationist at the West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District, would like to see grown more frequently and used in designs. Her comments for each plant are also included:

♥ **Native *Ceanothus*, including *C. thrysiflorus*, *C. prostratus***

“These are covered in bees. I like any *Ceanothus* that will be hardy here that might also be moving up from California.”

♥ ***Phacelia nemoralis* (for shade), *P. heterophylla* (for sun)**

“They’re super attractive to bumble bees and other bees.”



for what they’ve heard about. Like milkweed for the monarchs.”

At the retail store, display gardens draw people who see bees all covering a plant and turn around and buy it. *Ceanothus*, which brings in bushels of bees, is an early season choice that is her top-selling pollinator plant. Dinsdale, who said

knowledgeable salespeople are key to their pollinator program, has gathered together plants for butterflies in one area of the garden center and posts signs to give customers a heads-up.

*Salvia* (aka sage) also draws people. “*Salvia* is always thick with bees,” she said. “They’re hit harder than anything else.”

Dinsdale recommended *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Swiftly Violet’, a sturdy, drought-tolerant plant that grows about 1-foot by 2-feet and is hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 4a. Butterflies and hummingbirds use it as a dinner plate, as well

as the bees. Others on her top pollinator plants are *Coreopsis*, camas and the single-flowered *Leucanthemum* selections, particularly ‘Becky’ and ‘Angel Daisy’.

At **Portland Nursery**, general manager Suzy Hancock mentioned milkweed (*Asclepias*) as the pollinator plant everyone wants.

“We sell more milkweed than anything else,” she said. “We sell hundreds and hundreds of gallons to people.”

Hancock is happy about this but agrees with Steffen that beautiful butterflies and fuzzy honeybees get all the attention

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### Native *Penstemon* and *Lomatium* species

“Any from the valley to the mountains will do nicely.”

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 14)

to the detriment of native pollinators. To put the word out, Portland Nursery has developed brochures on bee- and butterfly-friendly plants. These are available from the nursery’s website ([www.portlandnursery.com/resources/brochures/](http://www.portlandnursery.com/resources/brochures/)).

In store, the nursery puts up signs and offers classes to educate customers not only about the plants, but other actions in the garden that help to replace a bit of pollinator habitat.

Choosing the appropriate plants is one way to support pollinators. But bees and butterflies also need water — a little mud bath will do. Hancock advises customers to:

- Cut back or do away with pesticides.
- Build small brush piles, leave some bare undisturbed ground for the ground-dwelling natives and, if possible, the snags of dead trees for cavity-dwelling bees.
- Look for single flowers with flat faces; fluffy double flowers deter bees.

Choose a diversity of plants and have some that bloom at different times of the year — some plants such as Oregon grape even bloom in the wintertime.

Kevin Cramer, marketing manager for **Van Belle Nursery** in Abbotsford, B.C., said he uses social media to educate growers and end consumers about their plants, many from Proven Winners® ColorChoice®, Star Roses and Plants and Bloomin’ Easy.

“Social media is our primary channel for promoting our pollinator plants,” Cramer said. “I post pictures and videos of bees — or hummingbirds if we’re lucky enough to capture a good shot — on Facebook and Instagram and it creates a lot of engagement. I believe it has made a good number of us excited to support the cause through our choices at the garden center.”

Van Belle also makes custom tags stamped with the message “Grown by >>>

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## Pollinators for bees

(Top) *Verbena bonariensis*. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA

(Bottom) *Lupinus*. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA



**Yerba buena**  
(*Clinopodium douglasii*)

"It's a nice ground cover for relatively dry semi-shade, good under Douglas fir and Oregon oak. It has small flowers but bees like it."



**Hall's aster**  
(*Symphotrichum hallii*)

"This is the true Hall's. I keep trying to buy it and end up with other bully asters instead, perhaps due to grower error. The real ones are very well behaved."

bee-friendly nursery in Western Canada." Most of the flowering shrubs, trees and perennials grown on Van Belle's 100 acres are pollinator-friendly cultivars, many of which are natives (cultivars of natives).

His favorite varieties are 'Peach Lemonade' rose and 'Candelabra' hydrangea by Bloomin' Easy. The rose blooms continuously from spring to frost and the hydrangea. "[The hydrangeas have] amazing form and massive flowers that the bees become obsessed with once pollen is produced during late summer," Cramer said. "I always stop when I'm walking the nursery to enjoy the bees and snap a few pictures to share."

### The reason it matters

For those who aren't on the pollinator bandwagon yet, consider how much they do for food production. One of every three bites we take comes from pollinated crops, according to Mary Logalbo, urban conservationist at West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District.

"They are really important piece in the food chain and critical for keeping our plants regenerating," Logalbo said. "We already have food insecurity at really high levels, even in Oregon. We can't jeopardize pollination and have any less."

The economic fallout of dwindling pollination could be serious, Logalbo pointed out. Not just for the agriculture and nursery industries, but also for agritourism. The farm loops, U-picks and roadside stands would suffer and some would disappear.

"So much of Oregon's economy is based on agriculture," she said. "The

ramifications to working lands, farmers, nurseries would be huge. A good base of our rural population would be affected."

Logalbo is heartened by public interest. Thousands of people have enrolled in the agency's Backyard Habitat Certification program, and *The Meadowscaping Handbook*, published two years ago, is in its second printing.

Efforts like these drive people to the garden center looking for the right plants to attract bees and butterflies, Skagit's Cady said. After the bumble bee fiasco, angry customers insisted on plants free of any neonicotinoid pesticides.

"Although this was several years ago, the stance has not changed," Cady said. "Consumers are still very interested in pollinator plants and they demand the plants they purchase be neonic free."

Skagit immediately took a stance and sent out a letter to its customers that

they are committed to neonic-free finished production. Skagit also provides a list of pollinator-friendly plants for host, nest and food source.

Many of their sales reps teach classes on the subject to their independent garden center customers and they are quite popular.

One of Cady's favorites is lupine, both hybrids and natives. A new series, *Lupinus* Westcountry, with longer bloom time, more drought tolerance and a wide range of stunning colors, hit the market





**California figwort aka  
California bee plant  
(*Scrophularia californica*)**

“This woodland pollinator plant has interesting flowers.”



**Deltoid balsamroot  
(*Balsamorhiza deltoidea*)  
and Mule’s ears  
(*Wyethia angustifolia*)**

“They’re beautiful, native to the valley, and attractive to gardeners and bees.”



**Pacific waterleaf  
(*Hydrophyllum tenuipes*)**

“A good pollinator for dry shade.”

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 16)



and they’re selling out quickly. Lupines are a great food source as well as a host for butterfly larvae. Cady also loves monarda, a longtime preference for its stop-you-in-you-tracks blossoms and fragrant foliage. Monarda makes a triple play, providing food for bees, butterflies and hummingbirds.

Customers and Cady adore *Verbena bonariensis*, an upright plant with bright purple flowers that sit on top of long, robust stems. It loves

the heat, is drought tolerant and a great food and host source.

Don’t forget grasses, which often get lost in the shuffle. Cady recommends *Festuca* ‘Beyond Blue’ as a good candidate for providing nesting and as a host source.

At the Elisabeth Miller garden, Steffens has noticed how crazy bees are for the tall sedums, such as the standby ‘Autumn Joy’ and *Euphorbia wulfenii*. Another is *Ekianthus campanulatus*, a good four-season plant with beautiful form, nodding creamy yellow or pink flowers and wild fall color.

Two cultivars — ‘Red Bells’ and ‘Showy Lantern’ — were chosen for the Great Plant Picks program, which features plants chosen by horticulturists that are ideal for the Northwest climate. On the website are plant lists for a multitude of situations, including Plants for the Birds and the Bees that features plants for butterflies, hummingbirds, bees and birds.

Surprisingly, bumble bees love *Epimedium grandiflora*. Leaf cutter bees go for it, too, harvesting sections of leaf to take back to their nests.

“Some people might get annoyed, >>>



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## Pollinators for bees:

Black-eyed susans. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA



### Pacific hound's tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*)

"Early flowers, attractive to gardeners and bees, native to valley."



### Thin-leaved pea vine (*Lathyrus holochlorus*) and Columbian lily aka western tiger lily (*Lilium columbianum*)

"Attractive to gardeners and bees, native to valley."



### Leafy pea (*Lathyrus polyphyllus*)

"Attractive to gardeners and bees, native to valley, woodland gardens."

but they don't know what it is," Steffen said. "I don't mind at all. They're working the flowers, as well as taking some leaves. It's only fair."

### Annuals matter as well

Ellen Egan, owner of **Egan Gardens**, urges people not to forget annuals, which provide much fodder for pollinators over a long period of time.

"Annuals are given a bad rap," said Egan, who gives classes on pollinator plants. "People say you're just throwing your money away. But, they bloom con-

tinuously May through September. How long do shrubs bloom? Three weeks."

Bees need a reason to visit yards, and a diversity of heavy-blooming annuals will bring them and keep them around. Egan has a whole list of annuals that bees go gaga over: *Lobelia*, *Bacopa*, marigold, *Zinnia*, *Nicotiana*, *Pentas* and *Lantana*.

White alyssum is an old standby and she points to new vegetatively propagated varieties like 'Silver Stream' and 'Yolo White' that hold up better to August heat. For hummingbirds, she looks to *Cuphea vermillionaire*, a drought-tolerant

annual with firecracker orange flowers. No deadheading needed. She's also enamored of *Salvia* 'Evolution Violet', a taller, more slender version of 'May Knight' but not as gangly as 'Black and Blue' or *S. guaranitica*.

### A designer's view

In her garden designs, Pat Aceff, owner of Visionscapes Northwest, pollinator plants inform her designs.

"I've reached the point in my career where I want plants to do more than just sit

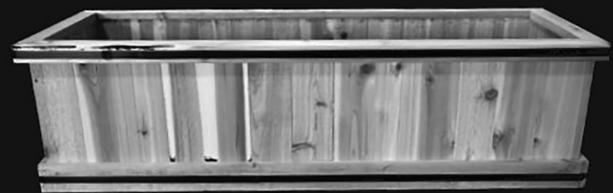


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**Spreading gooseberry  
(*Ribes divaricatum*)**

“A ground cover shrub with bell shaped flowers.”

**(CONTINUED ON PAGE 18)**



there and look pretty,”  
Acheff said. “I  
want to see that  
they perform  
some kind  
of function  
if possible. I  
use pollinator  
plants in every  
design I can, even  
modern designs.”

Acheff finds her cli-  
ents receptive and excited  
about pollinator plants, add-  
ing that nurseries are driving that.

It’s rare these days that people say they  
don’t want plants that attract bees.

*Ribes* selections, especially ‘King  
Edward’, find their way into her plans,  
as do vine maple, good-old black-eyed  
Susan and *Vaccinium ovatum*. “Clients  
light up when I tell them something is a  
native plant,” she said.

Though she has nothing against  
non-natives, Logalbo is thrilled that  
people recognize the benefits of natives.

“Natives provide specific roles for  
specific native pollinators that need  
certain plants to sustain themselves,”  
Logalbo said, pointing to monarchs and  
milkweed and fenders blue butterfly  
and Kincaid lupine. “There are a lot of  
associations we don’t understand yet.  
The more we plant natives, the better.”

Logalbo talks about how natives  
have evolved for our climate so will  
need minimal resources like water if  
planted in the right place. She also men-  
tions that non-natives have the poten-  
tial to be invasive and can outcompete  
native plants in natural areas and  
gardens creating a monoculture with  
less diversity of flower types and bloom  
times and leaving gaps in seasonal for-  
age and habitat for pollinators. >>>



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## Pollinators for bees

*Cynoglossum grande*. PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA

 Oregon gooseberry  
 (*Ribes lobbi*)

“Lovely, fuchsia-like flowers on an attractive woodland shrub.”

 Pacific sanicle (*Sanicula crassicaulis*)

“A nice ground cover for dry shade.”

 Broadleaf lupine (*Lupinus latifolius*)

“Attractive to bees and gardeners.”

More natives coming from growers would make Logalbo happy. She’d love to see homeowner-size packets of native wildflower seeds for different bioregions, which are in high demand. All in all, more natives on the market would be a good thing. Some that she mentioned are native penstemons and lomatium species, Pacific hound’s-tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*), deltoid balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza deltoidea*) and spreading gooseberry (*Ribes divaricatum*).

“If they’re available, people will snap them up,” she said. ☺



*Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years of experience writing for The Oregonian and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service. Kym can be reached at [kym.pokorny@oregonstate.edu](mailto:kym.pokorny@oregonstate.edu).*