



Plant A Pollinator Garden

By Kaelin Smith, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

With spring quickly approaching, many gardeners have already begun preparing for the upcoming growing season. Amidst the seed starting and planting, we tend to forget about the insects and other small animals that make growing fruits and vegetables possible. Pollinators are an essential component of all healthy ecosystems. By transferring pollen from one flower to another, pollinators ensure the reproductive success of most flowering plants, including food crops. Recently there has been a significant decline in pollinator populations, especially species of bees and butterflies. This reduction is primarily the result of habitat loss and the improper use of pesticides. Constructing pollinator gardens, or adding flowering plants to already established landscapes, can help conserve the pollinators we rely on.

There are a few factors to consider when planting a pollinator garden. First, a suitable site must be selected. A sunny location is ideal, as many pollinators and their favorite plants thrive in full sun. Areas with less sun exposure can also be used, but make sure to choose plant species that are shade-tolerant. When selecting plants for a pollinator garden, keep in mind that diversity is key. Using an assortment of plants that bloom in the spring, summer, and fall will ensure that pollinators have access to nectar throughout the entire growing season. Perennial plants are preferred because they are relatively low maintenance and grow back each year. Incorporating annual flowers such as sweet alyssum, ageratum, cosmos, and sunflower is an excellent way to add a pop of color to your garden. However, be careful when using annuals, as many varieties have been bred for aesthetic purposes and may consequently lack the pollen and nectar pollinators need.

It is also important to prioritize the use of native plants. Native plants are already adapted to your region and support the survival of local pollinators. Plants and pollinators have evolved together over time, hence why different species of pollinators consider some plants more attractive than others. The color and shape of a flower will influence the types of pollinators that will visit it. For example, bees are attracted to white, yellow, and blue flowers while butterflies prefer blooms that are red, orange, pink, and purple. Native plants to incorporate into pollinator gardens include: Anise hyssop, Beebalm, Goldenrod, Moss phlox, New England aster, and Purple Coneflower.

If buying plants from a nursery, make certain that they have not been previously treated with any pesticides. Pesticides help to control nuisance pests, but can also be harmful to beneficial insects, especially bees. If pesticides must be applied, select the least non-toxic ones available, use sparingly, and always follow the directions printed on the label.

In addition to nectar, pollinators also need a safe environment to nest and lay their eggs. Leaving a undisturbed, bare patch of soil or pile of brush in your garden will provide habitat for ground-nesting and cavity-nesting bees. To encourage the presence of butterflies, it is essential to supply food for their larvae, also known as caterpillars. Monarch butterflies are considered specialists, meaning they only complete their development when feeding on one particular plant: milkweed. A few native species of milkweed are butterfly milkweed (*Asclepius tuberosa*), common milkweed (*A. syriaca*), and swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*). Others, like the black swallowtail feed on members of the parsley family. Check out the list of Northeast pollinator plants at <https://www.xerces.org/pollinator-resource-center/northeast>.

Do not be discouraged if outdoor space is a limiting factor; No pollinator garden is too small! Planting just one pot of flowers can contribute to the preservation of pollinator populations. Consider adding a few extra flowering plants to your yard this year to support the insects that keep our gardens flourishing.

For information on pollinator gardens or on other gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.





