

Attracting Beneficial Bees

Gardeners can help counter the decline in pollinator populations

By Kathy LaLiberte

Bee balm is one of many flowers that beneficial bees love.

Flowers that Bees Love

- Alyssum
- Anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*)
- Annual poppies (*Papaver*)
- Asters
- Bee balm (*Monarda*)
- Black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia*)
- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Clover (*Trifolium*)
- Coneflower (*Echinacea*)
- Cranesbill (*Geranium*)

As an avid gardener, I'm fortunate to have Russell Devino as a neighbor. Russell is one of the Vermont's top beekeepers, and though he has his own apple orchard and garden, I know his bees consider my garden their real home.

Summer mornings my yard is humming with activity. The poppies are bent low under the weight of the bees that crowd every blossom. Bees blanket the thyme and oregano. My "lawn", which has more white clover and dandelions than grass, has to be traversed with care. And when the asparagus fronds are in bloom, they vibrate with bees.

Honeybees are abundant in my garden, and I thank Russell for that. But I know few gardeners are as lucky as I am. Worldwide, pollinator populations are in serious decline. As I've learned more about this problem, I've realized that there are probably many other kinds of bees in my garden besides honeybees. In fact,

there are about 4,000 species of native or wild bees in the continental U.S., including bumblebees, carpenter bees, sweat bees, leafcutter bees, and mason bees.

Here are a few other things to keep in mind:

- **Singles are best:** Flowers with double petals do not attract bees as well as single-petal blossoms. This is because most double blossoms offer less pollen and nectar than single blossoms. Often their extra set of petals has replaced pollen-laden anthers. Double blossoms also make it more difficult for bees to reach the inner flower parts.
- **Blue, purple and yellow:** Bees find blue, purple and yellow flowers most appealing. Flat or shallow blossoms, such as daisies, zinnias, asters and Queen Anne's lace, will attract the largest variety of bees. Long-tonged bees will be attracted to plants in the mint family, such as nepeta, salvia, oregano, mint and lavender. Long-tonged bumblebees are attracted to flowers with hidden nectar spurs, such as larkspur, monkshood, monarda, columbine and snapdragons.
- **Add variety:** Some kinds of bees are active all season long while others, such as the orchard mason bee, are only active in the spring. Plant a garden that has a variety of plants in bloom from early spring through late fall.
- **Plant wildflowers and native species:** Before gardeners were around to plant zinnias and alyssum, native bee species dined on wildflowers. Because wild bees and wildflowers evolved together, you can be pretty confident that wildflowers will provide bees with an excellent source of both pollen and nectar. Whenever possible, include native plants in your garden and landscape.
- **Create habitat:** Loss of nesting habitat is a serious problem for wild bees. Perfectly neat yards and gardens do not provide the raw materials bees need to construct their nests. You can provide good nesting habitat by preserving a small brush pile, areas with dry reeds or grasses or deadwood. A muddy area will provide essential nesting material for mason bees.