



Pennsylvania Pollinator Series

3. Gardening for Pollinators



Our pollinators face an array of serious threats. We are part of the problem; we can be a part of the solution. As homeowners and gardeners, we can take a proactive role in conserving and enhancing pollinators by adopting pollinator-friendly gardening practices.



Penstemon (*Penstemon hirsutus*)

More than 140 million acres (6% of US land) are developed for urban and suburban use (Wuerthner, 2002), with about 40 million acres devoted to lawns (Tallamy, 2007). While turf represents a desirable and easy way to manage part of the backyard for outdoor recreational activities, homeowners often use it much too extensively. Not only are vast lawns wildlife deserts, but maintaining them can require the use of high volumes of water, fertilizers, pesticides, fuels, and time. Now is the opportunity to see these extensive stretches of turf as canvases that can be filled with natural and diverse textures, and colors of native and adapted plants.

An abundance of pollen and nectar, pollinator food, is one of the prerequisites for a sustainable population of pollinators. Most native pollinators fly small distances to collect food. In order for

a garden to be a worthwhile pollinator destination, it needs a wide variety of suitable plants in drifts or groups. The plant material selected should provide a balanced and overlapping bloom throughout the year. Frequently, lack of shelter is an even more pressing problem than lack of food. Standing dead trees or branches, piles of wood, patches of bare soil, and shrubs with soft pith are ideal nesting habitats for many of our pollinators. Usually, a less manicured garden provides the necessary pollinator nesting habitats. If the presence of piles of branches and dead trees is a liability issue, natural habitats can be enhanced or substituted with manmade pollinator nests.

Once food and shelter have been provided, a long-term goal is to ensure that backyard management practices are pollinator friendly. With the exception of controlling invasive plant species,

the saying that “less is more” applies to almost all backyard upkeep practices in order to create a pollinator habitat garden. Not only will pollinators and other wildlife thrive in a naturalized backyard, but by reducing the time spent on mowing, cleaning, pruning, deadheading, mulching, and applying pesticides, there will be more time to enjoy a backyard full of life.

With more time for recreation, families can observe the secrets of the life that pulsates in their backyards. Inquisitiveness will lead to knowledge, and knowledge will mitigate often unfounded fears, like the fear of being stung by bees or wasps. It is important to know that most bees and wasps are not aggressive. Only social bees

(honeybees and bumblebees) exhibit aggressive behavior if their colony is threatened. More than 95% of the bee species in the U.S. are solitary. For more on bee and wasp stings, read the Hymenoptera Stings section.

Bibliography

Tallamy, D. W. (2007). *Bringing Nature Home*. Portland: Timber Press.
Wuerthner, G. (2002). The Truth About Land Use in the United States. *Western Watersheds Messenger*, 8.

Source: Mathews, F. Schuyler *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902) 423

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