

HOME-GARDEN

'Don't worry, bee happy': Spring is here, and with it comes our most important pollinators

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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March in New England brings the earliest signs of spring. Plants that have been dormant all winter start to wake up and so do insects. As temperatures rise, native ground-nesting bees are among the first to emerge.

For most of my life, I confess that I was terrified of bees. Growing up in Florida, where stinging insects are active year-round, I felt like I always encountered something that wanted to sting me — bee or not — whether I was hiking in the woods, gardening in my backyard, or walking to school. Then I became a horticulturist and discovered the importance of pollinators. More than 75% of flowering plants rely on a pollinator to set seed or fruit. Pollinators help move pollen from the anther of a flower to the stigma of another. Pollinators can be bees, butterflies, birds, flies, moths, beetles, bats, and other small mammals. I became fascinated with bees in particular and decided I wanted to do everything I could to support them.

Bees are the most important pollinators for our food crops. One third of all of the food we eat is the direct result of bee pollination. Both non-native European honeybees and native bees do this work. The reason that bees are so effective at food crop pollination is that they deliberately gather pollen and nectar to bring back to their nests, so the chance of pollination is very high. Bees also exhibit pollen constancy, meaning they may visit hundreds of flowers of the same plant species on

each foraging trip. Plus, their bodies are perfectly adapted to carry pollen. Their body hairs are branched or feathered so pollen sticks to them easily and they have a space on their hind legs or under their abdomen, depending on the species, that is shaped to carry pollen.

Supporting bees starts with being aware of the different types of bees in our gardens and environments and learning about their needs. There are more than 4,000 species of ground and twig nesting bees native to North America. They come in many different shapes and sizes and their floral preferences are closely linked to their body size and the length of their tongue as compared to the size and shape of the flower and where nectar or pollen is located within. Only ten percent of bees in North America form colonies such as bumble bees, sweat bees, and the non-native honeybee. In New England, the other 90% — such as carpenter bees, leafcutter bees, mason bees and polyester bees — lead a solitary life.

What do these bees need and how can we support them? In our home gardens, it is important to think about a bloom succession to provide food for the longest possible period. I plan for overlapping bloom times and like to focus on native plants because they can be low-maintenance and best support native pollinators throughout their life stages. Start by choosing plants that bloom very early in the spring such as witch hazels, minor bulbs, maple trees, and serviceberries. Then overlap with late-spring blooming columbine, baptisia, elderberry, blueberries, and American basswood. In early summer, milkweed, wild geranium, echinacea, and mountain mint form a nice understory for dwarf sumac and sourwood trees. Joe-pye weed, cardinal flower, and bee balm are great late summer perennials, followed by goldenrod and asters in the fall.

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Two of the biggest threats to pollinators are habitat loss and pesticide use, but even a small home garden can help by providing food, water, and shelter. Many solitary bees nest on bare ground. I love mulched garden beds, so this has been a lesson in restraint for me as a gardener who is trying to create habitat. Gardeners should

always try to limit or eliminate pesticide use so pollinators aren't accidentally harmed when trying to control pest insects.

At New England Botanic Garden, we have display gardens that focus on pollinator habitat, and we teach classes for youth and adults that focus on pollinators. There are many organizations that provide great resources, and don't forget, programs like iNaturalist can help you identify insects you encounter at home or on your next Garden visit. So "bee" curious as you enjoy the growing season ahead, and don't wait to explore resources to help you support our region's pollinators.

Gardening Central Mass. offers ecologically focused tips and helpful stories for home gardeners from New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Steven Conaway. Located in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.