

Treeways

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Befriend the Bees

Honeybees and native bees are under assault. Habitat loss, pesticides, diseases, climate change and lack of diverse food plants all impact bee survival and productivity. Honeybee Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) is most likely caused by an accumulation of all the above problems and it affects our native bees too. About 75% of all flowering plants require the help by pollinators in order to reproduce. Fully 1/3 of our food comes from crops that rely on pollinators. An apple tree will not grow apples unless bees or other insects pollinate the apple blossoms. Basically no bees means no fruit. In China some fruit trees must be hand pollinated by human beings because pollinator insect populations have been so devastated.

Modern urban and agricultural land does not typically have the habitat diversity to support healthy populations of bees, butterflies, and other pollinators that we need. This could be changed with relatively minor changes to allow native wildflowers and flowering trees and shrubs to grow along the margins of lawns and fields. In yards flowering native species can be incorporated into traditional plantings and especially on our Sunfish Lake properties the areas past the lawn and gardens can become bee pastures when they are not treated with pesticides. Bees are flower feeders. Bees harvest nectar from flowers for energy and pollen from flowers for protein and just like us they need to get their food from a variety of sources so they get a balanced diet.

A weedless field of corn, soybeans, or almonds is a food desert for bees for 90% of the year. The reality is that bees and other pollinator species need many types of flowering plants that bloom consecutively throughout the year to have adequate nutrition to survive, grow, and thrive.

A huge acreage of the United States is lawns planted to turf grass monocultures. Heavily fertilized grass lawns require substantial focused inputs to keep them thick, dark green and growing fast. These lawns then require fertilizer, herbicides, irrigation, fungicides, insecticides and regular mowing. The conditions created in these intensively managed lawns are incredibly attractive to weeds, insects, and diseases that we must then control with more expensive chemical inputs keep them thick, dark green and growing fast. Intensively managed turf grass monocultures are toxic food deserts for pollinating insects and we need to mow them all the time.

The book “Bringing Nature Home” by Douglas Tallamy is a call to make a difference one yard at a time to save our native species of insects and also our native bird species by growing native plant species in our yards. Native plants support at least three times as many insect species and four times the volume of insects compared to non-native plant species. Many of our favorite native birds will be helped because nearly all birds, including seed and fruit feeding birds, require a high energy diet high that includes lots of insects during the breeding, egg laying and baby rearing times of the year.

When we improve our personal environments by planting or encouraging native wildflowers, shrubs and trees we will also improve the conditions for pollinators in each of our yards. Bees and wasps, butterflies and moths, flies, and beetles are the four major groups of pollinating insects. Small city yards can be planted with flowers attractive to honeybees and other native pollinators and have a positive effect. Just imagine what we could do with our large Sunfish Lake open spaces and yards. We can make a positive impact by reducing pesticide usage as much as possible, incorporating native flower plantings into our gardens, installing raingardens, installing native gardens, and reducing the area of intensively managed lawns. Together we can have a huge net positive effect that may in fact preserve our long-term food supply.

Here are some terrific native flowers to consider for adding in to an existing garden or a new Raingarden, prairie garden or bee pasture: purple and yellow coneflowers, white or purple prairie clover, wild ginger, strawberry, wild violets, wild geraniums, Maximillian sunflower, beebalm, Virginia waterleaf, black eyed Susan, blazing star, various milkweeds, various asters, various sunflowers, various sedges, hyssop, baneberry, cardinal flower, great blue lobelia, golden Alexanders, mint, crocus, alliums, blue vervain, goldenrod, and rudbeckias.

Especially good trees include: oaks, willows, cherry, plum, birches, poplar, cottonwood, crabapple, maple, chokecherry, boxelder, elm, hawthorn, spruce, white pine, hemlock, basswood, walnut, hackberry, and alder.

Shrubs and understory trees to use include: serviceberry, false indigo, chokeberry, ironwood, redbud, dogwood, hazelnut, rose, pussy willow, elderberry, viburnums, raspberry, blueberries, and other fruiting shrubs.

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