

# Treeways

2015 - 2

## Being Friendly with Native Bees

There is little to fear from native bees and I have never, ever heard of anyone being stung by a native bee. Most are small and if seen at all are probably thought of as colorful flies. Bumblebees are an exception in that they are larger and readily identified by nearly everyone, including children. Native bees are essential to certain plants because they provide cross-pollination services that must happen before seeds or fruit can be produced. Native bees are at least several more efficient at pollination services than the domesticated honeybee. Honeybees are actually a Eurasian species. About 1/3 of our food comes from plants that must be pollinated by insects before the plants can produce the food we need (seeds, nuts, fruit, vegetables). That is one reason why the decline of pollinator species and gross bee population is so troubling. Our food supply is richer and much more interesting because of the foods that we get from plants requiring insect pollinators.

There are 300-400 species of native bees in Minnesota. Some are as small as 1/8" or as big as the biggest bumblebee. Many are only active during specific times of the year because their activity is timed to coordinate with specific flowering plants. Most Minnesota native bees are solitary, which means that they live alone even though they may be living near other solitary bees.

You can do a project to attract and encourage native bees. You can create nesting places by collecting bundles of hollow weed stems and placing them in desirable nesting locations in your yard. The first year that I tried this some of the tubes in all my nesting bundles were used. I have several around my yard and all the nesting material is recyclable and compostable. This year I am putting out bundles of elderberry stems for additional nesting sites.

What can I do, what can we do together to slow the decline in bee numbers and species? First start by using pesticides only when absolutely necessary. Just because one fly or mosquito flies by does not mean that we have to spray the whole house/yard/neighborhood. Just because we have one dandelion in the yard doesn't mean that we have to spray the entire yard with herbicides. Dandelions are a great food and energy source for native bees in the spring when there are only a few plant species flowering. Also planting clover into your lawn gives the bees another food source, captures some nitrogen for the lawn right out of the air, and in the opinion of your City Forester gives your lawn a more interesting appearance. Increasing lawn-mowing height allows the clover to bloom more.

Modern urban and agricultural land does not typically have the habitat diversity to support healthy populations of native bees, butterflies, and other pollinators that we need. In yards these native flowering plants can be incorporated into traditional plantings. You could make relatively minor changes to allow native wildflowers and flowering trees and shrubs to grow

along the margins of lawns and fields. If both you and your neighbors together allow you property margins to contain wildflowers a very significant area of bee friendly habitat can be developed. Lawn grass is one of the largest “crops” grown on the North American Continent and it covers 1.9% of the total land area of the continental United States. Changing a portion of our lawns to bee-friendly lawns and landscapes can actually have a huge effect. An added benefit is that a bee-friendly lawn is less work less work than a traditional lawn.

Here are some references to help you become actively bee and native pollinator friendly:  
University of Minnesota Bee Lab: [www.beelab.umn.edu](http://www.beelab.umn.edu), Plants for Pollinators:  
[www.entomology.umn.edu/cues/pollinators/plants.html](http://www.entomology.umn.edu/cues/pollinators/plants.html), Plants for Minnesota Bees:  
[www.beelab.umn.edu](http://www.beelab.umn.edu), Pollinators of Native Plants by Heather Holm, Living Landscapes of Minnesota: [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).

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