

Attracting Pollinators to Your Garden

-Al Barber County Master Gardener Volunteer



Especially this spring, we yearn to get outdoors and improve our yards and gardens. We want our environment to be aesthetically pleasing to us, but what about native plants and animals? With native habitats shrinking, we have the opportunity to create favorable local habitats around our homes and communities.

One key to successful backyard food production is the ability to attract pollinators. Important animal pollinators include honeybees, mason bees, bumble bees, mining bees, flies, moths, and other insects, as well as birds and some mammals. Sweet potatoes, berries, fruit trees, cucumbers, and many other plants require pollinators to produce food for our consumption. The best way to attract pollinators is to create an environment where they can survive and thrive.

With that in mind, here are ten ways to attract pollinators to your yard.

1. **Grow more flowers.** But not just pretty annual flowers. Flowering trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants can provide food and nesting habitat for pollinators. Spend time in your yard to see which existing plants attract pollinators and then work to expand those plantings. A good source for more information is <https://u.osu.edu/beelab/gardening-for-bees/>
2. **Plant to provide bloom throughout the growing season.** Early blooming trees such as maples, willows, and redbuds, and late season perennials like asters and goldenrod provide important food at critical times. Consult <https://www.oardc.ohio-state.edu/gdd/> for a sequence of native and non-native woody flowering plants for Ohio.
3. **Go Native.** Native plants provide a good source of nutrition for pollinators. Also, many native plants are critical for pollinators to complete their life cycles. Native pollinator and host plants include:
 - a. Trees: Maple, crabapple, linden, serviceberry
 - b. Shrubs: Ninebark, pussy willow, sumac, viburnum
 - c. Perennials: Aster, hyssop, milkweed, purple coneflower
 - d. Annuals: Cosmos, marigold, sunflower, zinnia
 - e. Herbs: Basil, borage, catmint, lavender, oregano
4. **Diversify.** Start with your lawn. Vast expanses of thick green lawn with no weeds may be pleasing to our eyes, but such a monoculture is unnatural. Leaving a little clover or other flowering weeds in your lawn and gardens provides essential cover and nutrition for many pollinators and other beneficial insects.
5. **Mix it up.** Planting flowers and herbs in and around your vegetable garden provides important food sources for insect pollinators. Consider planting sunflowers, zinnias, marigolds, cosmos, lavender, basil, borage, dill, fennel, oregano, and catnip in and around your vegetable garden. Also, consider planting vegetables and herbs in flower beds. If you plant all your tasty vegetables in one place, you are setting the table for garden pests.
6. **Grow (or tolerate) weeds.** Many “weeds” provide cover and food for a variety of pollinators. Beneficial weeds for pollinators include dandelions, creeping Charlie (ground ivy), Creeping

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thyme, Bee balm, Wild geranium, Joe Pye weed, clover, and Anise hyssop. Consider “tolerating” some “weeds” in your yard and gardens perhaps on the edges for pollinators.

7. **Provide Nesting Sites.** Brush piles, dead standing trees, and clumping grasses provide important nesting and overwintering habitat. Avoid the temptation to cut down dead grasses and flower stems in the fall. Leave some leaves and other garden debris for late spring cleanup.
8. **Provide a water source.** This can be a shallow bowl or birdbath (change water frequently) or a small pond.
9. **Limit pesticide use.** Avoid spraying insecticide on a plant or tree in bloom as this may kill beneficial pollinators. Instead use an integrated pest management (IPM) approach with multiple strategies to reduce pest damage. . A good resource for IPM in your yard is http://www.therockpile.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/OSU_Pest_management.pdf
10. **Not all pollinators are created equal.** Butterflies and butterfly gardens are beautiful additions to your backyard, but flies, bees, and moths are actually much better pollinators than many butterflies. Butterflies typically visit flowers to get nectar rather than harvest and distribute pollen. A good resource for attracting pollinators to the your garden is <https://woodlandstewards.osu.edu/sites/woodlands/files/imce/OSU%20Fact%20Sheet%20%20Attracting%20Pollinators%20to%20the%20Garden.pdf>

For questions about pollinators or gardening, go to the Portage County Master Gardener Volunteer Plant and Pest Hotline at go.osu.edu/pchotline or call (330) 296-6432. This service is available from April 1st to October 31st each year.

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