

The Buzz about bees: Nature's pollinators

Bees play a vital role in the health of gardens, farms, and natural ecosystems. Though they are small and often overlooked, these busy insects are responsible for pollinating a large portion of the plants that produce the fruits, vegetables, and flowers people enjoy every day. Understanding the importance of bees—and learning how to support them—can help homeowners create healthier and more productive outdoor spaces.

Pollination occurs when pollen from the male part of a flower is transferred to the female part of another flower. This process allows plants to produce seeds and fruit. Bees are among the most efficient pollinators because their fuzzy bodies easily collect pollen as they move from flower to flower gathering nectar. As they travel between blossoms, they spread pollen and help plants reproduce. While wind and other insects can also pollinate plants, bees are responsible for a significant portion of the pollination that supports agriculture and backyard gardens alike.

Many common foods depend heavily on bee pollination. Apples, blueberries, cucumbers, pumpkins, almonds, and many other crops rely on bees to produce a good harvest. Without bees, the availability of many fruits and vegetables would decrease significantly.

Even plants used to feed livestock benefit from pollination, meaning bees play an indirect role in producing meat and dairy products as well. Simply put, bees help support a large portion of the global food supply.

There are thousands of bee species around the world, and many of them live right in backyard gardens. Honeybees are the most widely recognized because they produce honey and live in large colonies managed by beekeepers. A typical honeybee hive can contain tens of thousands of bees working together in a highly organized social structure. Worker bees gather nectar and pollen, while the queen bee lays eggs that maintain the colony. Beekeepers often move hives to orchards and farms during flowering seasons to help pollinate crops.

However, honeybees are only one part of the pollination picture. Many other types of bees are equally important pollinators. Bumblebees, mason bees, and leafcutter bees are just a few examples of species that contribute greatly to pollination. Bumblebees are particularly valuable because they can fly in cooler temperatures and cloudy conditions when other pollinators remain inactive.

Unlike honeybees, many native bees are solitary, meaning they do not live in large hives. Instead, they nest in small holes in wood, hollow stems, or underground tunnels. These bees are generally non-aggressive and rarely sting unless directly handled or threatened. Because they are such effective pollinators, encouraging native bees to visit the yard can greatly improve the health of gardens and flowering plants.

The growing season. A variety of flowering plants ensures bees have food from early spring through late fall. Early bloomers such as crocus and fruit tree blossoms provide important food sources when bees first emerge after winter. Later in the season, flowers like sunflowers, coneflowers, and asters continue to provide nourishment.

Native plants are especially beneficial because local bee species have evolved alongside them and often depend on them for food. Wildflowers, flowering herbs, and flowering shrubs can turn a yard into a valuable pollinator habitat.

Reducing or eliminating pesticide use is another important step. Many pesticides that control garden pests can also harm beneficial insects, including bees. Even products labeled for garden use can be dangerous if applied during times when bees are actively feeding. When pest control is necessary, using targeted or natural methods can help reduce unintended harm.

Providing water sources can also attract bees and other beneficial insects. A shallow dish filled with water and small stones allows bees to land safely while drinking. Some gardeners also install small "bee hotels," which provide nesting spaces for solitary bee species that live in hollow stems or tunnels.

While bees sometimes make people nervous because of the possibility of stings, they are generally focused on gathering food rather than bothering humans. Most bees will simply move along if left undisturbed. In fact, their presence in the yard is usually a sign of a healthy, thriving ecosystem.

By planting pollinator-friendly flowers, reducing pesticide use, and creating welcoming habitats, homeowners can play a small but meaningful role in supporting bee populations. In return, these hardworking insects help gardens flourish, ensuring vibrant flowers, healthy plants, and productive harvests for seasons to come.



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