

### Creating a Pollinator Oasis: Attracting and Sustaining Pollinators

One of the greatest joys I receive from gardening, is the knowledge that I am providing a valuable habitat and food source for resident backyard pollinators. As my plants bloom to life each season, I am thrilled by the sight of monarch caterpillars feasting on milkweed or the delightful sound of honeybees buzzing through the sumac trees in my back field.

Creating these mini-oases full of beneficial plants for pollinators is more important now than ever before. As forested land, open fields, and prairies disappear all around us due to development, we can do our part to help offset these losses. If we incorporate the right plants into our landscapes, we will help sustain pollinator populations and maintain healthy backyard ecosystems.

When I talk to gardeners who desire to attract pollinators, picking the right plants is the first step in the process. While garden centers and big box stores will have beautifully colored, heavily blooming plants available for purchase, many of them don't produce enough pollen or nectar to be beneficial to pollinators. Some examples include garden mums, roses, and certain hydrangeas. Additionally, any plants that have double blossoms make it hard for pollinators to harvest what little pollen and nectar they produce due to the abundance of flower petals. Another fact that most gardeners never consider, is that many of the most common landscape plants sold today, have European or Asian origins. This makes them unsuitable host plants for the more than 4000 endemic pollinator species native to North America. A host plant is one in which a butterfly or moth will lay its eggs on and the hatchling caterpillars will use it as a food source and develop into maturity. For certain pollinators, such as monarch butterflies, they will only lay their eggs on milkweed. Other pollinators will lay eggs on a select number of plants, but they are always trees, shrubs, and flowering plants native to North America.

Some of the best woody host plants include oak, cherry, elm, hickory and willow. The humble oak tree alone is a potential host for upwards of 500 different species of Lepidoptera, which is the order of winged insects that includes all butterflies and moths. Other great woody host plants include pawpaw, *Asimina triloba*, which is a host for our state butterfly, the zebra swallowtail, along with spicebush, *Lindera benzoin*, which is the host for the spicebush swallowtail. A few excellent vining host plants include passionflower,



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*Passiflora incarnata*, host for the gulf fritillary, and pipevine, *Aristolochia marcophylla*, host for the pipevine swallowtail. Milkweeds are an excellent herbaceous host plant for the monarch butterfly. The two preferred milkweed hosts are butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, and common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*.



Monarch caterpillar on common milkweed, photo: J. Stefanski

While incorporating host plants is a key component of sustaining pollinators, one must also choose plants that are a good food source. Providing pollinators with pollen and nectar and ensuring that we use plants that bloom during different parts of the growing season is essential. Some excellent early season plants include bugleweed, pachysandra, foxglove, and alliums. During the prime months of summer, consider using coneflower, black-eyed Susan, coreopsis, bee balm, and phlox. My favorite summer bloomer is mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum*. Several species that have done exceptionally

well in my garden, include blunt mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum muticum*, and narrow-leaved mountain mint, *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*. Both are prolific bloomers, easy to care for, and provide a refreshing minty fragrance. Milkweeds are not only excellent host plants, they also provide valuable nectar for all pollinators. Common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*, is wonderfully fragrant and will add a delightful aroma to any garden during the early months of summer. Two excellent late summer bloomers are goldenrod, *Solidago*, and tall ironweed, *Vernonia gigantea*. Both will start blooming in August and will continue to provide pollen and nectar into early fall. For honeybees, having access to late season nectar and pollen is essential for helping them build reserves for the coming winter, and can often be the difference between life and death for a colony.



Honeybee foraging on goldenrod, Photo: J. Stefanski

While not every plant in my home landscape has been chosen specifically with pollinators in mind, I do my best to incorporate a few plants each season that will be beneficial as either a host or nectar to provide pollen and nectar into early fall. For honeybees, having access to late season nectar and pollen is essential for helping them build reserves for the coming winter, and can often be the difference between life and death for a colony.

While not every plant in my home landscape has been chosen specifically with pollinators in mind, I do my best to incorporate a few plants each season that will be beneficial as either a host or nectar source. As home gardeners, we have a tremendous opportunity to use our gardens for good and help offset the habitat loss that has occur all around us. Regardless of the size of yard, incorporating a few beneficial plants into your landscape will help promote and sustain pollinator populations. With our help, monarchs, swallowtails, and honeybees will be fluttering about the backyards of our children and grandchildren and for many generations to come.

Happy Gardening!

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For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is [jski@utk.edu](mailto:jski@utk.edu). Additionally, please check us out on the web at [rutherford.tennessee.edu](http://rutherford.tennessee.edu) to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer