Providing a Place for Pollinators

If you enjoy fruits like blueberries and apples, or if you plant summer squash or fall pumpkins in your garden, you have a reason to protect our pollinators.

“Without pollinators, including butterflies and bees, the flowering plants they visit would not produce food,” said University of Illinois Extension Horticulture Educator Richard Hentschel. “The pollination process also helps provide fibers, medicines, and other products, and it provides food and habitat for wildlife.”

Pollinators include the aforementioned bees and butterflies, as well as moths, beetles, hummingbirds, and wasps. Overall, populations of these pollinators have decreased due to habitat loss, disease, and pesticide misuse.

“We all can help by adding certain plants to our yards and gardens,” he said. “Pollinators need flower nectar and pollen to survive, and in the case of butterflies, they may also need other plants to sustain caterpillars. If you want to attract a certain species, do a little homework to see what plants are desired for each stage of life.”

Good plant choices can be perennials, annuals, vegetables or herbs. Examples of positive pollinator plants include asters, bee balm, black-eyed Susan, Joe Pye weed, purple coneflower, great blue lobelia, bellflowers, hollyhocks, indigo, sunflowers, butterfly weed, milkweeds, goldenrod, larkspur, and tomatoes.

“It is best to choose native plants,” Hentschel advised. “Cultivars may not be as effective at providing for our pollinators, and exotic plants may not feed a diverse population of these helpers.”
Following are a few additional tips to keep in mind when planning a place for pollinators:

- Create a new bed or choose an existing bed, about 4 feet by 6 feet to allow for plant growth
- Pick a variety of flowers for each blooming stage of the season (late spring through fall)
- Plant similar flowers in groups of three or five
- Supplement perennials with annual choices like zinnia and sunflower
- When selecting flowers, remember to keep in mind how much sun and moisture the area receives

Gardeners should also limit or exclude insecticide use in pollinator areas, Hentschel added.

“In a few simple steps, gardeners can create a pollinator space and help promote populations of these important partners.”

To view the Butterfly Magnets plant guide online, visit www.pinterest.com/pin/525865693967044347/

To learn more about growing in our region, visit web.extension.illinois.edu/dkk/hort.html or www.facebook.com/extensiondkk, or contact your local Master Gardener Help Desk.

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**Lawn Talk: Summer Tips & Emerging Trends**

1. **Length:** Mow at a higher setting to keep grass blades longer, which will shade the soil and keep roots cooler in the heat.

2. **Frequency:** When the lawn is cut more often, clippings can be left and not bagged. This can provide soil at least one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet, saving both time and money.

3. **Water or Not:** If your desire is for a green lawn all summer long, then a commitment to provide water is needed. Deeply watering the lawn will promote longer roots, making the grass more drought-tolerant during brief dry periods. However, it will need more fertilizer. If you choose to let your lawn go dormant, remember, it does not mean you can ignore it. The grass plant crowns will still need a half-inch of water a couple times a month.

**Pollinator Possibility:** Turf grass may be attractive to homeowners but it holds little appeal for pollinators. An emerging trend is to replace turf grass with urban meadows. Clover, for example, fixes nitrogen, is drought tolerant, resists pet urine and grows in bad soil. Plus, mowing is reduced to a few times a year. Other broadleaf plants with flowers include lamium and thyme.