

Help Pollinators Help You

For most Americans, pollen means allergies and bees mean stings-- but to farmers, when one out of every three bites of food people take is made possible by a pollinator, bees and pollen mean much more. Pollinators play a tremendous economic role. The problem is, too many people see the pollination process as a free service from nature; most people don't know the unprecedented threats facing wild and managed pollinators worldwide.

Managed honey bee colonies have shrunk by 25 percent since 1990, and there are fewer bee hives now in the United States than at any time in the past 50 years. For more than a decade, biologists have documented declines in populations of migratory pollinators including butterflies, bats and birds. Habitat loss and excessive exposure to agrichemicals, as well as spread of diseases, parasitic mites, invasion of Africanized honey bees, and elimination of government subsidies for beekeepers are most often mentioned for what's been called an impending pollination crisis.

Pollinators are particularly important to fruit, vegetable and nut growers, with crops valued in the billions. California producers rent half a million bee hives a year for almond trees alone.

On your land, there are several things you can do to help pollinators.

Don't disturb wild areas. Bumblebees nest in grass in old mouse nests, for instance, and other bees nest in dead wood.

Plant pollinator friendly crops. Clovers, alfalfa, trefoils and other legumes enrich and protect the soil and are pollinator favorites.

Use conservation buffers. Current USDA programs offer annual rental payments to plant grasses or trees on qualifying cropland. These contour strips, grassed waterways, hedgerows, filter strips and windbreaks offer some of the best habitat to pollinators, and they can be within the crop field that needs their pollination service.

Let plants bloom. Try to time mowing, tilling or grazing management decisions so that plants have the opportunity to bloom.

Time pesticide application. Your pesticide label lists bee toxicity and residual time.

For information on environmental issues, stop by the Bert J. Harris Agriculture Center on March 7th. Over 20 environmental agencies will be on hand to answer questions and give away literature.

The second annual Conservation Connection Day will be held on Saturday, March 7th from 9:00 am until 4:00 pm. This is an opportunity to come out and talk to the folks from many different environmental agencies, obtain useful information and get free goodies. There will be free food and lots of children's activities, so bring the whole family.

Pollinator-friendly plants include many native wildflowers. An excellent place for them is in streamside buffers next to crop fields.

Did you know....

A bee's wings vibrate about 435 times a second. More than 75 percent of the crop plants that feed the world, and many plant-derived medicines in our pharmacies rely on pollination by insects or other animals for healthy fruit development.