

Give Bees a Helping Hand This Spring

by Kim Eierman Lifestyle



Homeowners can do several things on their landscape to help honey bees. Photo Credit: *Contributed*

WESTCHESTER COUNTY, N.Y. -- The significant decline in honey bees over the past few years has been widely documented. There appear to be many causes, including: viruses, pests on bees, pesticides, poor nutrition, and overtaxing of commercial colonies.

It is a problem that continues, with no end in sight. Honey bees are particularly valuable to man – in addition to pollinating many plants, they are the only bees which produce sufficient honey for human consumption.

What many people do not realize is that that honey bees are not native to the U.S.

It is thought that honey bees were first brought to Virginia by colonists in the early 1620s. We have an enormous variety and quantity of native bees – approximately 4,000 species in the U.S. Many native bees are important pollinators. If you like blueberries, thank a bumble bee – the most effective pollinator of blueberry plants. Some of these native bees are also in trouble, and that is not good news for crop and plant pollination.

There are a number of things that you can do in your own landscape this spring to help challenged bees.

Include early blooming trees and shrubs in your landscape for bee species that emerge early in the spring. Maples are a particularly valuable source of early pollen and nectar. Even our common Pussy Willow is a critical early pollen source.

Emphasize regionally native plants in your landscape that have evolved with our native bee species. Honey bees are “forage generalists” and can utilize many of our flowering native plants.

Plant for a succession of bloom from early spring through late fall to provide nectar and pollen to different bee species which are active at different times of year.

Plant a diversity of native plants with varied flower shapes and sizes. Plants with long, tubular flowers, such as Larkspur, can be accessed by long-tongued bees. Bees with shorter tongues, like honey bees, need plants that are easier to access, such as Asters.

Give bees a floral target by planting a mass of the same plant for them to find. Aim for a 4 foot x 4 foot expanse, if possible. Meadows or mini meadows, with a repetition of flowers, will also work well for bees.

You can provide bees with habitat as well as forage. While Honey Bees live in large colonies, native bees live in very small colonies or are solitary. 70 percent of our native bees nest in the ground and need a sunny area with bare soil or very little vegetation.

Bees are highly sensitive to pesticides. Skip the secret sauce in your landscape.

By creating a bee-friendly landscape you will have the bonus of attracting butterflies and improving the overall ecological health of your property. And, you will enjoy the beautiful landscape you have created.

Kim Eierman, a resident of Bronxville, is an environmental horticulturist and Founder of [EcoBeneficial!](#) When she is not speaking, writing, or consulting about ecological landscapes, she teaches at the New York Botanical Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, The Native Plant Center and Rutgers Home Gardeners School.