

WESTCHESTER home

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Helping Bees in Crisis

7 STEPS TO CREATING A BEE-FRIENDLY LANDSCAPE



The European honey bee and many of our 4,000 species of native bees in the US are in trouble, dying off in large numbers. Without bees to pollinate many of our common fruits, nuts, and vegetables, our entire agricultural system would be affected. Most of our suburban and urban landscapes offer little in the way of nectar and pollen sources that bees depend upon, and our frequent use of pesticides—even seemingly benign lawn-care products—is devastating to bee populations. Here are seven ways you can help bees on your own property while maintaining a beautiful landscape.

Include a significant variety of trees and shrubs in your landscape. From spring through fall, woody plants provide bees with valuable forage resources. Some of our earliest blooming trees, including maples, poplars, oaks, and willows, provide critical pollen and/or nectar when bees first emerge in the spring. In mid- to later spring, trees such as redbuds, cherries, and crabapples provide nutrition. As summer arrives, basswoods, locust trees, and even sumacs are major sources of nectar and pollen.

Avoid choosing double-flowered plants. Perennials and flowering woody plants are sometimes bred to have extra flower petals to make them showier, but, as these have little or no nectar and pollen, for the most part they are useless to bees and other wildlife. Select single-flowered plants, closest to their natural forms, to support bees and native wildlife.




Plan a succession of blooms from early spring through fall. Bees require forage sources throughout their active seasons, which take place from March through October. Honey bees will emerge from their hives if the temperature reaches 55 degrees in February, so an early-blooming witch hazel or crocus in your yard would provide them with a much-needed meal.

Reduce or eliminate your lawn in favor of flowering plants. The typical, weed-free American lawn is an ecological wasteland to bees and native wildlife. It demands high levels of water, fertilizer, and costly maintenance, and in return gives almost nothing back to the environment—no food, no shelter, and no cover to the living creatures in our ecosystem. You can make your lawn more bee-friendly by avoiding pesticides and allowing clover and dandelions to grow within the turf; both plants are significant

sources of nectar and pollen for honeybees. Clover is often the major forage resource for urban and suburban honey bees and makes for particularly tasty honey.

Eliminate synthetic pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides. Don't spray before you know what the problem is—it may not be worth treating at all. A leaf cutter bee, which uses leaf material to create its nest, may have chewed your rose bush. Not to worry—it takes just what it needs, rarely causing significant damage to the plant. Tolerate some insect damage in your landscape. Nature isn't perfect, and your landscape doesn't have to be either. If you must use pesticides, use organic ones and use them sparingly and carefully, only when bees are not flying. *Organic* does not mean benign, and can be just as lethal to sensitive bees. A bee-friendly landscape is a pesticide-free landscape.

Support the 470 species of native bees in New York by emphasizing regionally native plants. Our native plants are important because they have co-evolved with all the living creatures in our ecosystems and directly support them. For example, our native bumble bees are the most efficient pollinators of blueberry plants, having evolved a special way of shaking pollen out of the flower using its unique method of "buzz pollination." Some of our native bee species are "specialists" and depend upon just a few native plants for their forage; without those specific native food sources, those specialist bees become extinct. Even the valuable European honey bee can forage on many of our native plants. You can help these bee species, and the overall ecosystem, by emphasizing native plants in your landscape.



Provide nesting sites for native bees in your landscape. While European honey bees live in the large hives you see on farms and in urban/suburban beekeeping, native bees are solitary or nest in very small numbers. Seventy percent of them nest in the ground and must have access to a sunny location with bare soil or very little vegetation. The other 30 percent make their nests in old mouse or beetle tunnels, holes in trees, pithy plant stems or twigs, and in similar spots. Leave an area of bare soil in a sunny location; keep perennials up through winter as bee-nesting cavities; and leave some less-tidy areas with old logs and dead trees (cut back to a safe height in highly trafficked areas). 

Kim Eierman, an environmental horticulturist and Westchester resident, has a new book coming out that provides more useful tips on gardening to support bees (www.ecobeneficial.com).



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