Make your yard a Bee-Friendly Backyard

New York is home to over 400 native bee species. Along with the imported honey bee, these native bees pollinate agricultural crops and wildflowers. Bees aren’t the only pollinators. Specialized flies, beetles, butterflies, birds and bats pollinate our flowering plants too. But honey bees (and the wonderful honey they produce!) are familiar. Many people have heard about honey bee and native bees declines, and the possible impact on our food supply. In 2015, Governor Cuomo established an interagency task force on pollinators, with several goals, including pollinator habitat enhancement. That’s where you come in.

Did you know that your backyard can offer habitat and food for these pollinators? The choices you make in planning and caring for your landscape can affect pollinator abundance and species diversity. Just like us, these insects need shelter, food, and an environment safe from harmful chemicals. Here are four steps you can take to make a pollinator paradise.

1) **Give ‘em Shelter**: Most of our native bee species are solitary and do not live in hives. Instead, they nest in dead wood and in the soil. Create structural refuge with things like brush piles, woodpiles, and areas of exposed, undisturbed soil. That doesn’t fit in with your landscape aesthetic, you say? Then follow step two!

2) **Make it look Deliberate**: If a brush pile sounds messy, instead create a decorative wattle fence of bent twigs. Woodpile out of place in your landscape? Add a rustic arbor or bench made of natural, untreated wood. Even a split rail fence can harbor these solitary bees. The key is to create structure that persist through the season and to vary the types of structure so many different species are attracted to the garden.

3) **Dish up a Variety of Foods**: Many flowers provide nectar. But not all of our tiny solitary pollinators can handle the big flowers. Vary the sizes and types of flowers you plant. Plants in the mint family, and plants in the “carrot” family, like dill and golden alexanders, have many small flowers that produce lots of nectar. They are attractive to look at and great for solitary bees and other beneficial insects. (See the other pamphlet and websites in the sidebar for more plant ideas). When you purchase plants that flower, be sure to ask if those plants have been pre-treated with a pesticide.

A bumble bee visiting the native milkweed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, or butterflyweed. Bumblebees are excellent pollinators and use “buzz pollination” to take their services to the next level.
4) **Use pesticides Knowledgeably**: We understand that sometimes pesticides are needed in a managed landscape. Pesticides include not only insecticides, but herbicides and fungicides as well, some of which are very toxic to bees. If you choose to use a pesticide, use it wisely. Remember that pollinators are attracted to flowers: you don’t want to poison their food source!

- Avoid spraying plants that are flowering, or if you must spray them, use a low-residual pesticide and spray when bees are not active (early morning or late evening). Another option is to remove the blooms during the treatment window.
- Know the pest’s lifecycle so that you are timing your treatment effectively.
- Use the least toxic pesticide with the shortest residual activity to get the job done. Pesticides that don’t stick around allow pollinators and other beneficial insects to move back in quickly and safely.
- Be conscientious with pesticides that have systemic or long residual action. If they are deemed necessary, be sure to remove blooms and understand that some systemic pesticides may be active in the plant for several years.

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**Our Challenge to You!**

Make your back yard a pollinator paradise. Let your neighbors know what you are doing in your pollinator friendly backyard. Announce your commitment with a sign from one of many bee-friendly organizations (see sidebar). Together our backyards, public gardens and parks offer the possibility for rich and diverse pollinator habitats. Make yours a bee-friendly backyard!

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**What’s the Buzz? Building our Pollinator Garden**

We have a pollinator garden and we’d love you to come visit. Cornell Cooperative Extension staff can help you incorporate the ideas suggested in this article to create a beautiful bee friendly space. You’ll find ideas for your home garden--from patio planters to the back-forty--that include gorgeous native plants, and a wide variety of fragrant herbs. Keep an eye on our calendar: in Ithaca and Putman County, we offer a wide range of hands-on workshops related to pollinators, beekeeping and creating bee-friendly spaces. Check our websites for suggestions and updates: [http://pollinator.cals.cornell.edu/](http://pollinator.cals.cornell.edu/) and [http://putnam.cce.cornell.edu/](http://putnam.cce.cornell.edu/)

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**Citizen Science Pollinator Projects**

You can get involved. There are many online and backyard projects that will help you create pollinator-friendly landscape. In the process, you will be helping scientists collect data on pollinators. If you have apple or other fruit trees in your yard, sign up to help with Cornell’s Northeast Pollinator Partnership below.

**Northeast Pollinator Partnership:**  
[www.northeastpollinatorpartnership.org](http://www.northeastpollinatorpartnership.org)

**The Great Sunflower Project:**  
[www.greatsunflower.org](http://www.greatsunflower.org)

**Pollinator Watch:**  
[www.pollinatorwatch.org](http://www.pollinatorwatch.org)

**Bumblebee Watch:**  
[www.bumblebeewatch.org](http://www.bumblebeewatch.org)

**Xerces Society:**  
[www.xerces.org/pollinators-northeast-region/](http://www.xerces.org/pollinators-northeast-region/)