



FROM A GARDENING PERSPECTIVE...

BE A BEE SAVER

By

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Are bees in trouble? Yes, for years now, the population of bees in our country has been declining. What has caused the decline? Disease, pesticides and loss of habitat are major contributors in the loss of bees.

Can individuals save the bees? Yes. If each person in Palo Pinto County believed that, the bees could be saved. Why on earth do people want to save bees, and is it possible, one asks?

These questions can be answered in several parts. Why save bees? One in every three bites of human food is from a plant visited by pollinators like bees. It is fair to say bees are absolutely critical to the food supply and food is essential to human survival. Basically, humans live because bees live!

Bees can be saved and here is how: feed them. Yep, bees forage for pollen and nectar from plants that bloom...like flowers, trees, grasses, vegetables, shrubs, and even cactus. People should plant gardens that bees will love as much as people do! The Bee Smart™ Pollinator Gardener is a comprehensive guidebook to selecting plants for bees specific to any area. Plants to consider in our area include: American Beauty Berry, Salvia, Primrose, Echinacea, Cardinal Flower, Larkspur, Indian Paintbrush, Sunflower, Prairie Clover, and Texas Redbud just to name a few. Wildflowers should be planted along fence rows, roadsides, in public places, and in planters in town. If the owners of every ranch, yard, piece of idle land, and business would dedicate some landscape to bees, Texas bees could be saved and, as a side note, butterflies would benefit too.

Once the bees are fed, they must be protected. But how? Bees need safe places to live with clean water and air, just like us. The use of pesticides and other chemicals must be kept to a minimum...especially on the flowers that bees frequently visit. Cover crops like

clover, vetch, or alfalfa can be used to offer a great buffet for bees, especially when flowers are dormant.

Nesting habitats need to be increased. More people could raise honey bees, provide hives and collect honey. Some people think a teaspoon of locally produced honey helps with allergies to local pollens like cedar and ragweed. This is an opportunity for small local businesses.

But not all bees are honey bees. There are many native Texas bees that do not live in colonies (and they don't sting as often because they don't have a hive to protect). These are called solitary bees. They often live in the ground or in dead trees. To encourage solitary bees, the gardener needs to provide sunny, well-drained patches of bare ground. Keeping some portion of a flower bed free of mulch, exposing the soil, is a quick and easy way to provide habitat for ground-nesting bees. A lack of deadwood can be addressed by installing nest blocks...boxes that shed water and are filled with paper tubes in which the bees can deposit eggs.

Finally, if we demand and buy local honey, more people might raise honey bees, thus increasing their population. If you are still curious about bees, check out Teaxsbeekeeper.org; txbeeguild.org; or watch Marla Spivak TED talk.

Got a bee question? Contact the Palo Pinto Master Gardeners at the Extension Office, (940) 659-1228.