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Make a Difference

By Shannon Bly Outreach Coordinator at Whidbey Island Conservation District

PLAN A POLLINATOR GARDEN THIS FALL

Pollinators, such as bees, butterflies, syrphid flies, beetles, ants, hummingbirds, and other insects, are responsible for one in three bites of food we eat! They are really essential to our natural ecosystem, and they need four things to be healthy and happy: food, water, shelter, and a place to raise their young, otherwise known as habitat.

Most of the pollinators around Whidbey are bumblebees, solitary native bees and syrphid flies. Bumblebees are social like honeybees, living together in nests they dig in the ground. Solitary native bees live alone, creating nests in abandoned rodent and bird nests, in sandy bluffs, or in the canes of native plants like salmonberry and thimbleberry. The solitary bees raise their young in these nests, rarely traveling more than a mile to forage for food for themselves and their young. Examples of solitary native bees include sweat bees, mason bees, leafcutter bees, and cuckoo bees.

Syrphid flies, also called hoverflies or flower flies, are among the most frequent visitors to flowers, providing up to half the pollination our plants need. There are over 6,000 species of syrphid flies in the world. Many of them have yellow and black stripes, and are often mistaken for bees or wasps. One species, Volucella Bombylans, even has a fat, furry body like a bumblebee, and lays its eggs in the nests of social wasps or bumblebees so the larvae can feed on the bees' pollen stores.

In the urban areas and housing developments we humans build, concrete parking lots and sidewalks, long stretches of lawn, and rows of buildings replace pollinator habitat, creating large areas where pollinators can't survive. Remember, most of our native bees don't travel very far for pollen and nectar. This means we need habitats for these bees every mile (or less). If every household plants a pollinator garden, either with flowers for forage, plants for nesting, or both, then we can provide our pollinators with the habitat they need to continue their important work.

This fall, Whidbey Island Conservation District and Endangered Species Coalition are working with three island schools to build pollinator gardens with the students. Planting the gardens with native plants and wildflowers will allow the students to learn about pollinators and pollination, growing plants, and the connections between plants, bees, and people. In the spring, as the flowers begin to bloom, the



students will be able to see the fruits of their labors and observe pollinators in the gardens. As a community, we invite you, Whidbey, to join us in adding more pollinator gardens and habitat to our island in the next few months!

Fall is the best time to plant a pollinator garden. Native plants, which provide both nesting places, shelter, and food for pollinators, need to be watered regularly to establish healthy root systems. Once these plants are established, they don't need much maintenance at all. The great thing about native plants is they have adapted to our climate and soils already, and can grow here with very little intervention. If native plants are put in the ground in the fall, they receive rain all winter long, allowing them to establish themselves faster with less watering from the gardener.

Wildflower seeds are also best planted in fall. Many of these seeds require a period of freezing in order to germinate. It makes sense - the flowers drop their seeds by fall, the seeds overwinter in the soil, and then germinate again in the spring when soil temperatures warm up. If nature sows wildflower seeds in the fall, we should too.

It's important to give pollinators flowering plants all season long. Some flowers are early bloomers, providing the first food for bees waking from hibernation or hummingbirds returning from their winter migration. Other flowers bloom late into the year, providing the last opportunities for food before winter. The longer the pollinators can forage and raise young, the more young they can raise.

When planning your pollinator garden, remember to include flowering plants for each season - spring, summer, and fall - and native plants for nesting and shelter. If possible, leave old flower stalks and leaves in the garden to overwinter, and try not to disturb the soil with garden forks and shovels. This garden debris and undisturbed soil provides native bees with nesting places to hibernate for the winter. And don't spray herbicides and pesticides on your pollinator garden, especially not on blooms, as these chemicals can negatively affect the nervous systems of the bees.

Visit www.whidbeycd.org/backyards-habitat for resources about planning pollinator gardens, creating bumblebee nesting habitat, buying native plants and wildflowers, learning and teaching about our many native bees, and more! If you'd like help in creating your garden, or just need someone to look over your plans before you get started, we provide free conservation assistance to everyone on Whidbey Island, so don't hesitate to contact us with your questions.



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