

Help Save Bees in Your Yard



Native Carpenter Bees eat nectar and cross-pollinate this Swamp Milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) in my yard.

Why are people asking how they can help bees?

It's because many know that European Honeybees have declined, and native bees now play a significant role in the pollination of flowers and crops that provide 1/3 of our food and drink. In addition to fruits and vegetables, bee-pollinated plants are used to make medicine, chocolate, vanilla, peppermint, coffee and wine.

Your small city garden can help save native bees!

Add beautiful plants to your garden, like the Swamp Milkweed pictured above in my front yard. Native bees are adapted to pure native plants (not cultivars or hybrids). The bees use native plants to eat nectar, carry pollen to pollinate plants and feed their babies, hide under leaves during storms and sleep on top of the flowers at night.

For a bee plant list, enter your zip code into the [Pollinator Planting Guides](#). Buy plants from a reputable organic or native plant dealer because some plants purchased at large retail stores contain pesticides that kill bees.

I include a variety of native plants that bloom at different times throughout the season in my yard. In return, bees pollinate my plants as in this [video from my yard](#).

Learn to identify gentle native bees and wasps. Avoid swatting native bees because they rarely sting unless provoked. Most stings are from wasps that nest together to protect their hive. Search the Internet for photos, and check your yard for Yellow-jacket nests in the ground, Paper wasp nests under eaves or in slats and Hornet nests in trees. Uncovered garbage and kitchen scraps attract Hornets.

Yellow-jackets are the wasps that usually ruin picnics; however, Native bees are harmless, even though they buzz loudly. If Carpenter bees drill holes into your wood that cause problems, paint the wood with polyurethane in early spring when you first see them flying and before they lay their eggs.

Use yard maintenance techniques that do not kill bees. First, allow natural predators to control insects that damage plants in your yard instead of using chemicals. Second, practice organic lawn care. Apply a natural fertilizer ingredient, like corn gluten, to control pre-emergent broadleaf weeds when ground temperatures reach 50 degrees in spring (~ 3/15 - 4/10 in Ohio) and in fall (~ 8/15 - 9/10 in Ohio). Over-seed bare or weedy areas after rain has dissolved corn gluten (~ 5 weeks) with a chemical-free grass seed, like *TLC (Titan)*, available at most garden centers.

Sadly, most bee kills occur when bees pick up pesticides while pollinating plants. Even some organic products are toxic to bees. See page 2 in the [Xerces Factsheet table](#). Contact your Public Health Dept. to opt out of having your yard sprayed for mosquitoes because these chemicals kill bees.

Provide clean water in a shallow dish, splash water on rocks that have a large indentation and spray leaves that can hold water (like the Cup Plant). Mud or sand puddles allow bees to drink safely, and some bees use the mud for nests. Use a small stick to pick native bees out of deeper birdbaths where they can drown.

Create different kinds of nest sites. Leave some bare spots (no mulch, just soil) in your garden for friendly, soil-nesting native bees. Build a brush pile in an out-of-the-way corner, if regulations allow. Drill holes in a dead tree trunk to create nesting sites 3/32" to 3/8" in diameter and 6" deep. Read more from [Xerces Society](#).

Avoid commercial Bee Houses because they attract disease, predators and invasive, non-native bees and wasps, so use for education only.

Share what you've learned with neighbors and friends, and post a *Certified Wildlife Habitat* Sign to explain what you are doing and why. [Certify online](#) with the National Wildlife Federation.

To learn more about backyard conservation, subscribe to the monthly 'Nature Scoop' e-newsletter at www.backyardhabitat.info.

– Toni Stahl, Habitat Ambassador, 2020