

# A Guide to Attracting Bees to your Backyard



Bees play a critical role in healthy wild plant communities and gardens. About 30 percent of our diet is the direct result of a pollinating visit by a bee to a flowering fruit tree or vegetable plant. Providing bee habitat in your yard can increase the quality and quantity of your fruits and vegetables.

In the United States, there are nearly 5,000 different species of native bees. Most of them are solitary, friendly bees that nest in holes in the ground or burrows in twigs and dead tree limbs. These bees do not have hives to protect them, so they are not aggressive and rarely sting. Bumblebees, carpenter bees, sweat bees, leafcutter bees, digger bees, and others pollinate many different kinds of plants.

## ***Very few bees can nest in manicured grass lawns.***

Bees are attracted to most flowering plants, and are especially fond of blue and yellow flowers. Try planting your garden to have different species blooming in the spring, summer, and fall. Don't worry, nearly all species of bees are gentle and will not sting you. They are simply searching for food, pollen and nectar to feed themselves and their young.

## **The Right Flowers**

By selecting the best bee-rewarding plants, you can attract beneficial pollinating bees and other creatures to your flower and vegetable gardens or backyard fruit orchard. The most important consideration is how to use a maximum of native annual and perennial wildflowers which naturally grow in your region. These plants evolved there and are adapted to the growing season and local climate and soils. They often require less water, fertilizer, and pesticides than exotics and hybrids. Native wildflowers will also provide your bee visitors with more nutritious pollen and nectar. Plant breeders do not think about providing floral rewards for pollinators and their magnificent creations are often all show and no nectar for the bees.

Once you have provided your garden landscape with attractive and rewarding bee plants, there are a few other things to keep your bees healthy and around to pollinate another day. Apart from bountiful flowers, all bees require places to hide from predators, to locate and court a mate, and establish their nests. They need you to help provide safe havens from predators, parasites and chemical insecticides.

## **A Place to Raise Young**

In most cases it is not floral abundance but nesting sites that is limiting for our native bees. Bees in the large family of leafcutter bees nest in the ground in

abandoned beetle burrows in dead wood. Most of them require small leaf pieces which they cut and then fashion into natal cells for their young. They might also collect downy plant fibers or small pebbles and plant resins to complete the job. Please allow these leafcutters to cut a few elliptical holes from leaves of some of your garden plants. They will pollinate your fruits and vegetables as they go about their housebuilding and grocery shopping to provision their hidden pantries and bee nurseries.

***In most cases it is not floral abundance but nesting sites that is limiting for our native bees.***



In creating a bee garden, it is important to remember that you should leave a small patch of bare ground somewhere in or around your garden where bees can establish their underground nests. Very few bees can nest in manicured grass lawns. Similarly, if you or your neighbors can leave a dead tree or dead branches, these will be valuable nesting sites for many leafcutter and mason bees. Tie some dead branches up against your garden shed or other building to create some enticing holey bee real estate. The more beetle burrows the better for the bees.

If you have access to elderberry stems, cut and dry some into 1-2 foot lengths. With a drill, different sized starter holes can be drilled into one end and into the sides of the woody stems. Sharpen one end like a tent stake and push

them into the ground around your yard. The bees will soon find them and reward you for your bee stewardship efforts.

### **Bee houses**

Bee houses are easy and fun to make, or they can be purchased commercially. To build your own, start with pieces of untreated scrap lumber and drill bits of various sizes from 1/8-inch to 5/16-inch in diameter. 5/16th of an inch works best for Mason bees, including the Blue Orchard Bee. Use some scrap lumber and drill holes 3 to 5 inches deep but not all the way through the wood block. Space the holes about 1/2-inch to 3/4-inch apart. Nail your bee blocks up securely in places protected from direct sun and rain, such as under building eaves, in the early spring.

### **Water Sources**

Bees also need sources of water. These can be provided by a pond or bird bath. Some require mud as a building material for their nests. If you are lucky enough to have Blue Orchard Bees in your neighborhood, or other so-called Mason bees, encourage them by providing some mud. Create a one foot tall conical mound of soil near your garden. Allow some water to seep up from a pan at the base. The Mason bees will collect balls of mud from the wet soil at the proper height and reward your work by sticking around and increasing in numbers.

### **Bee-Friendly Pest Control**

Bees are extremely sensitive to many commonly applied insecticides. You can practice integrated pest management by purchasing beneficial insects such as ladybird beetles (lady bugs), green lacewings, or praying mantises. You can also encourage insect control by allowing spiders to build webs in your yard or ants to build nests in your garden.

If you cannot avoid using some insecticides, try to use less persistent ones which have proved safer for bees and other pollinators. Be sure to follow the instructions on the label, and apply it when the bees are the least active.

### **Certify Your Backyard as a Wildlife Sanctuary**

After you have followed Sage's How-to Attract Bees Guide and our other [How to Attract Wildlife Guides](#) to providing habitat to attract bees and other wildlife to your backyard, you can certify your backyard as a wildlife sanctuary. As long as you are providing the four basics for habitat specified in the Sage How-to Attract Wildlife Guides, including food, water, shelter and a place to live, you qualify.

Along with a personalized certificate, you will receive a Backyard Wildlife Habitat sign to post in your yard. This sign is a great way to show your neighbors and community that you're working to attract bees and other wildlife and provide a natural habitat for the animals that visit and live in your yard. Your backyard will also be entered in the National Registry of Backyard Wildlife Habitat Sites.

For an application to certify your backyard as a wildlife sanctuary, please visit the National Wildlife Federation's [Application for Certification](#).

**From Sage: A Resource for Natural Living**  
**<http://sagebug.com>**