

A photograph of a hummingbird in flight, hovering near a cluster of bright pink flowers. The bird is shown in profile, facing right, with its wings spread. The background is a soft-focus mix of purple and green, suggesting a garden or forest setting. The lighting is natural, highlighting the bird's feathers and the vibrant colors of the flowers.

Romancing the Pollinators

By Maggie Lee

Last year in early November, with warm weather still with us, I sat among spires of Douglas fir in the forest along the Big Tesuque listening to a warbling stream, its edges softened with tussocks of autumn grasses. Long arches of fallen and weathered trees framed the bare-branched understory of Tea Leaf Willow, currant and Rock Spirea. Dangling seed heads of amber and mauve-hued grasses, ruby-berried Kinnikinnick and icy blue pussytoes wove together this forest enclave. With pen and paper in hand, I noticed shadows from the low branches of the evergreen fir moving gently across the white page. The more we observe and experience a variety of wild habitats—from alpine tundra, forest, stream, steppe, chaparral, desert and coastal plains—the greater the possibility to emulate and practice the spontaneity of nature in our own environments.

A habitat rich in mutually beneficial species cultivates diversity, the connective tissue linking nectar- and pollen-producing plants with nectar- and pollen-collecting animals. This supports a vital ecological process, for through the transfer of pollen a flowering plant is fertilized, allowing reproduction and development of fruit and seed. Co-evolution has allowed for floral adaptation producing shapes, colors, fragrances and nectars designed to attract just the right pollinator. The NAPPC Pollination Primer tells us that “over 200,000 species of animals act as pollinators, many distributing pollen in different ways. Vertebrates, birds or bats carry pollen in their feathers or hair. Invertebrates, bees, wasps, butterflies and moths lack

hair, rather have bristles on their legs, head or other body parts. Honeybees have tiny baskets on their hind legs for carrying pollen back to the hive. When butterflies use their long proboscis or hummingbirds use their long beaks and brush-like tongues to sip nectar from tubular flowers, they get peppered with pollen on their heads or nectar gathering appendages.”

Here are some cultivation tips and ideas from design practices for attracting pollinators gathered from both personal experience and from the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign and the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation.

Cultivation Techniques

After a few autumn frosts, pull away mulch from the plants and turn in compost. Autumn is the optimum time for this practice accommodating root growth activity, so we apply Biodynamic compost and amendments into the soil. Collect colorful leaves from fruit trees, ash, linden and maple to use for mulch, allowing the garden to go to sleep beautifully. In spring, the remaining leaves can be crumbled and left or removed. I use the Biodynamic sprays 500 and 501 that have been rhythmically stirred, then sprayed on soil or plants. In the summer, I again rhythmically stir a mixture of milk, honey and water and spray on plants, which aids in bringing beneficial insects. These practices offer energies and matter essential to invigorating, nourishing and supporting *balanced* life force for the soil, plants and thus pollinators.

Suggestions for Attracting Pollinators

- Experiment with companion planting and permaculture plant guilds rather than relying on pesticides, which may destroy the good with the bad.
- Include native and adaptable plants well suited to local growing conditions. Choose plants compatible in moisture and cultural needs. Learn their growth habits and sociability status to avoid one plant overtaking its neighbor.
- Choosing heirloom varieties of herbs and perennials will provide good foraging. Hybridization has reduced the production of nectar and pollen and sometimes leaves the resulting plant completely sterile.
- Choose several colors of flowers. Bees have good color vision and are especially attracted to blue, purple, violet, white and yellow. Butterflies favor orange, yellow, bright pink and blue flowers. Hummingbirds seek red, orange and yellow flowers, while moths search out white flowers, especially fragrant night bloomers.
- Provide a wide selection of flower forms and shapes. Butterflies perch on the rims of flowers and prefer broad petals like Echinacea or cluster of florets like Butterfly Bush, dill or fennel. Hummers like long tubular flowers like hyssop or trumpet vine. Create a dynamic relationship between structure plants (i.e. materials with strong form), such as the trunk of a fruit tree, a Current shrub, spires of grasses, globe-like shapes as in Echinops or artichoke, flat heads as in yarrow or Echinacea. Contrast these with the supportive fillers—Nepeta, Salvia, oregano, thymes, Gaura and Coreopsis.
- Planting in drifts comprised of one species will attract more pollinators than individual plants scattered throughout a habitat patch. The size of the drift relates to the size of your garden. Aim toward an artful randomness of varying densities reflective of a wild meadow. Leave wild space near your garden/meadow which will benefit from

the additional nectar and pollen available from forage plants in the surrounding landscape. As a design element, this transitional link can lift and lead the eye to wider views inviting a sense of reference while lending a gentle naturalness and visual cohesiveness.

- Plant for flower diversity displayed over a long season from the earliest Pasque and wallflowers and currents to late season asters and Chamisa. This way you can support a range of pollinators flying at different times of the season.
- Provide shelter, nesting areas and feeders for birds and other pollinators, such as wooden nesting blocks, hummingbird feeders, small water features, large sunny boulders for butterflies, arbors covered with vines. Plant lindens, maples, oaks, pines, and spruces to provide gleaming sticky resins, saps and gums for birds to collect in gluing together nesting materials and for bees for use in the hive as propolis.

As grasslands, fields and forests disappear, so do their pollinators. Let's help balance this loss of habitat by practicing restorative ecology and establishing pollinator-friendly gardens, protective refuges where pollinators may live by their intrinsic nature. Bees pollinate the clover and alfalfa which the dairy cows eat producing the milk and cheese we enjoy. In the realm of nature, no process is closer to the heart of life than pollinator partnership. *ℓ*

Maggie Lee is proprietor of Terra Flora, a garden design-build landscape firm, find her at www.gardengaia.com

Resources

Forgotten Pollinators by Stephen Buchann and Gary P. Nabhan. Island Press, 1997.

Josephine Porter Institute for Applied Biodynamics www.jpibiodynamics.org
Northamerican Pollinator Protection Campaign. www.pollinator.org
and www.nappc.org

Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. www.xerces.org

PLANTS WHICH ATTRACT A WIDE RANGE OF POLLINATORS

TREES

Chokeberry
Crab Apples
Cherry
Peach
Plum
Hawthorn
Linden
N.M. Privet
Redbud
Serviceberry

ANNUALS

Coreopsis
Cosmos
Larkspur
Nasturtiums
Sunflowers

SHRUBS

Beauty Bush
Blue Mist Spirea
Butterfly Bush

Chamisa

Currant
Elder
Fernbush
Leadplant
Lilac
Russian Sage
Nanking Cherry
Willow

PERENNIALS

Asters
Black Footed Daisy
Butterfly Weed
Echinacea
Echinops
Gaura
Goldenrod
Honeysuckle
Liatris
Lupine
Mints
Nepata

Penstemons
Purple Prairie Clover
Salvias
Sulfur Buckwheat
Wallflower
Yarrow

VEGETABLES/HERBS

Artichoke
Broccoli
Carrots-seeded
Celery-seeded
Dill
Fennel
Hyssop
Kale—seeded
Lavender
Marjoram
Oregano
Parsley
Radish—seeded
Strawberry
Thyme

