

September 13, 2015

Garden Column

Butterfly and Bee Friendly Plants

Dr. Robert Nyvall

rfnyvall@gmail.com

Most everyone, who follows boxing, is familiar with Mohammed Ali's braggadocio, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." Somehow this is a fitting quote for an immodest person as the author Rabindranath Tagore said, "The gaudy butterfly is sure that the flowers owe thanks to him." On the modest side this author also says, "Bees sip honey from flowers and hum their thanks when they leave."

This characterization of the two insects is repeated by other authors and poets. "Butterflies are self propelled flowers." Robert Heinlein, science fiction writer. And Maurice Maeterlinck, Nobel prize poet and essayist said in "The Life of the Bee", "If the bee disappeared off the face of the earth, man would only have four years left to live."

The bottom line is we like to have both kinds of insects in our garden regardless of the anthropomorphic traits we ascribe to them. Both insects are vital parts of our ecosystem. To that end think about plants in general not just as decorations but as functioning parts of our yard's ecosystem that attract wildlife to the garden. Not only flowers but vegetables, berries, and shrubs that attract bees and butterflies but also hummingbirds.

It seems that both insects are attracted to the same plants for basically the same reasons. Certain plants have pleasant scents indicating the presence of nectar which can be sensed by the insect's sensory organs. Nectar may be secreted by the plant itself and is a great energy source. In the case of bees this is also useful in producing honey. Nectary guides are certain patterns on the flower petals which literally point to the inside of the flower and guide the insects into the flower. Some flowers revert to enticement and have adapted themselves to look like female bees. The male bee is tricked into thinking the flower is a female bee and goes to mate with it!

Examples of "bee and butterfly-friendly" perennial and annual flowers, vegetables and fruits are common and most can be found at Bloomers. In my experience, one of the best, if not the best flower to attract bees and butterflies is monarda. Monarda, sometimes called bee balm, is a great plant for attracting bees, humming birds, and butterflies. Hummingbirds are also very attracted and I have witnessed aerial combat over a monarda bed by several diminutive fighters. The different monarda varieties have white, purple, or red blooms and there are "dwarf-type" varieties. This plant gives a wonderful "minty" aroma, especially during early morning. Monardas bloom from mid July until September. Plants prefer moist but well drained soils and full sun and I have found it necessary during dry spells to water as monardas tend to wilt, especially during hot, cloudless days.

Technically, most monardas are zone 4 plants. However, they seem to overwinter relatively well in Zone 3 but expect some winter die back due to the shallow nature of their root system. Some varieties are susceptible to powdery mildew, especially during humid weather; but the disease, although unsightly, does little harm to plants.

Later in the summer butterflies appear to be more common and bees are on a quest for pollen. This is a good time to have a "buffet" of blooms for our insect friends. Not only are the rudbeckias, both black-eyed susans and coneflowers, attractive to both insects but the color they

add to a garden is moral lifting before other flower color fades followed by the drab monochromatic days of winter. Coneflowers (Echinacea) attracts both bees and butterflies. Coneflowers will begin blooming sometime in mid summer and almost immediately after a bloom opens it will have bees and butterflies competing for the pollen.

Every gardener likes to have asters around as the “late-bloomers”. These daisy-like perennials with starry-shaped flower heads are wonderful attractants for both bees and butterflies, even hopefully for Monarchs as they prepare for their journey south. And of course, the big reason gardeners like this plant is the color they bring to late summer and fall gardens when other blooms are fading. A pot of asters from Bloomers can be planted even now.

Another plant that attracts numerous bees is sedum. Sedum blooms later in the summer and the blooms will be crawling with bees. Sedum, especially Autumn Joy, has a sweet aroma even for plugged up noses. The flowers are nondescript but are loaded with sugars and other bee attractants.

Milkweed should have the suffix “weed” removed from it’s name and replaced by a less odious one such as nectar. Monarch butterfly larvae feed exclusively on milkweed. These plants were common but habitat destruction has reduced their numbers and a milkweed in the garden was formerly considered to be a weed. Thus, gardeners hacked them out until it became widely known that these are beneficial plants. Most milkweed species are toxic to vertebrate herbivores due to alkaloids contained in the leaves and stems. When Monarch larvae ingest milkweed they also ingest the plant’s toxins making the larvae and adults toxic to many predators. Interestingly the plants depend upon butterflies, moths and bees for pollination, a kind of entomological mutual aid society. The flowers are delicate but a welcome addition to a butterfly garden.

There are several other perennial flowers that make for an excellent insect attractant. Included are hollyhock, joe-pye weed, globe thistle, peony, turtlehead, and the well named butterfly weed. Several annual flowers are also good bee and butterfly attractants including, surprisingly, dandelions. Others are clovers, marigolds, and two of my favorites, sunflowers and zinnias to name a few.

If you’re interested in a bee and butterfly garden next year, think about other plants also. Don’t care for flowers? Several fruits and vegetables are also great attractants including cantaloupe, cucumbers, green peppers, and pumpkins. Fruits are raspberries, strawberries and my favorite fruit, blueberries. Honeysuckle, while not a fruit, produces copious amounts of sugar that’s especially an attractant to bees. Again, most of these attractant plants are found at Bloomers.

Lastly, one of the most important things we can do to attract bees and butterflies is to avoid the use of broad spectrum pesticides. Think about alternative control methods such as oils, soaps and microbial insecticides such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). However oils and soaps still kill caterpillars if sprayed directly on them and they will also die if they feed on plants treated with a Bt formulation.

"Just living is not enough," said the butterfly, "one must have sunshine, freedom and a little flower." ~Hans Christian Andersen