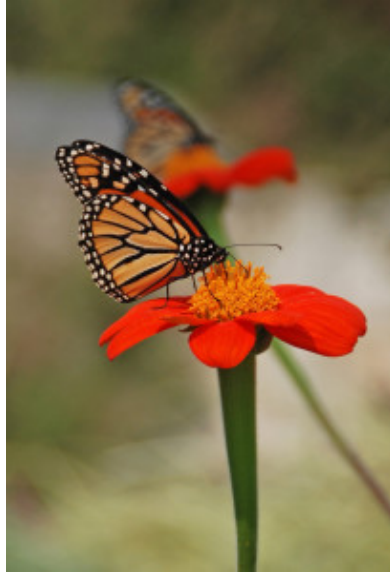


Many benefits to pollinator gardens



A monarch butterfly on a tithonia blossom.

Photo/Melinda Myers LLC

By Melinda Myers

Whether planting a garden, enjoying the beauty of your landscape or sitting down to a delicious meal, you have bees, butterflies and other pollinators to thank. These essential members of our ecosystem are responsible for much of the food and beauty we enjoy each day.

Unfortunately pesticides and habitat loss are threatening their existence. There is something you can do to help. Turn your garden, backyard or balcony into a pollinator's habitat.

Plant a variety of flowering plants that provide nectar and pollen throughout the season. Planting masses of natives, herbs and other pollinator favorites like sedum, zinnias, alyssum, cosmos, and columbine will attract these beauties to

your landscape. Include a variety of day and night blooming flowers in a variety of colors and shapes to support the widest range of pollinators. But don't let a lack of space dissuade you; even a window box of flowers can help.

Keep your plants healthy and blooming with proper care. Match the plants to the growing conditions, provide needed water and fertilize with an organic nitrogen fertilizer when needed. You'll promote slow steady plant growth that is less susceptible to drought and pests. Plus the slow release low nitrogen won't interfere with flowering which is essential to the health and well being of our pollinators.

Supplement pollinators' diets with a bit of rotten fruit. And be sure to provide trees, shrubs, parsley, dill and other plants that caterpillars, grubs and the immature stage of other pollinators prefer to feed upon. Put away the pesticides and tolerate a few holes in the leaves of their favorite plants. With a diversity of plants you can easily overlook the temporary leaf damage. Plus, this is a small price to pay for all the benefits they bring to the garden.

Provide pollinators with shelter from predators and the weather. Include a variety of trees, shrubs and perennials. Leave patches of open soil for ground nesting bees and some leaf litter to shelter some butterflies, bumblebees and other pollinating insects. Supplement natural shelter with commercial or homemade nesting boxes. You'll find do-it-yourself plans on the internet from various educational sources.

Puddles, fountains, birdbaths and even a damp sponge can provide needed water. Include water features with sloping sides or add a few stones to create easier access. Or sink a shallow container of sand in the ground. Keep it damp and add a pinch of sea salt for the butterflies and bees.

Maximize your efforts by teaming up with your neighbors.

Together you can create a larger more diverse habitat that provides pollinators with the resources they need to thrive.

Your efforts will be rewarded with greater harvests, beautiful flowers and colorful birds and butterflies visiting your garden.

Gardening expert, TV/radio host, author and columnist Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more than 20 gardening books.