



Alamosa Landscapes

Save the Bees with Flowers - P 1

by Marilyn Loser

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You may have heard recent dire reports about the health of bees. There are many scientific reports of “colony collapse disorder” in beehives and decline due to reduced habitat. The Pollinator Partnership says the US has lost over 50 percent of its managed honeybee colonies in the past 10 years. According to the Huffington Post, one of every three bites of food we eat depends on the honey bee as they pollinate so many of the plants that we (and our livestock) eat every day.

One of the best and easiest things you can do to help these crucial creatures survive and thrive is to plant annuals, perennials, shrubs, and trees in your landscape that will give bees the food they need.

Before listing what grows best in Alamosa, let's look at the traits bees prefer in plants. There are five main attributes: color, odor, shape, nutrition, and landing platforms. Bees like bright white, yellow, blue, and ultra violet. Red flowers appear black to bees and are not attractive to them. Note: people can't detect ultra violet light while bees can. Contrasting color patterns on flower petals are detected by special ultraviolet photoreceptors in bee's eyes. These patterns are called nectar guides and help bees to quickly locate a flower's center. Sweetly aromatic or minty fragrances are most attractive to bees.

Also, bees prefer flowers with a sturdy landing platform. While they can visit a flower without landing, they prefer one with a solid platform so they can land and not just hover. I didn't know this before! This includes flowers such as snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus* – except red), veronica (*Veronica* – many are purple and some are white), wild roses (*rosa* – especially yellow Harrison and pink woodsii), and penstemons (*Penstemon strictus* -- choose purple for the bees).

Regarding nutrition, bees are looking for two things when they visit your garden: nectar (it's loaded with sugars which are a bee's main source of energy) and pollen (provides a balanced diet of proteins and fats).

I didn't realize there are about four 4,000 different species of bees in North America. They are different sizes, have different tongue lengths, and will feed on different shaped flowers.

Consequently, providing a range of flower shapes means more bees can benefit.

Many web sites encourage shoppers to determine if any seedlings you may want to buy have been raised with neonicotinoid pesticides. Referred to as "neonics," these neurotoxins are somewhat controversial and are considered by many to be toxic to bees. For a bee-friendly garden, consider using the least toxic and most environmentally-friendly methods for pest control if you need to apply control.

Bees need flowers throughout the growing season. While some folks suggest leaving dandelions during early spring for the bees as there are not many other flowers blooming during this time, I don't! I have quite a few bulbs that bloom early. If I leave the dandelions, I have a LOT of weeding to do over the summer.

Almost all of the plants I mention in this column can be viewed online at Alamosaflowers.net and/or Alamosatrees.net with photos from Alamosa. Early season bee-friendly flowers blooming now in Alamosa include daffodils, jonquils, and forsythia. As I walk the garden I see colorful buds about to open on flowering almonds (*Prunus triloba plena* or *tenella*) and a few yellow tulips (*tulipa*).

Coming up in May will be our lovely crab apple trees (*malus*), penstemons, yellow and orange Icelandic poppies (*Papaver oriental*), golden currants (*Grossulariaceae* – they thrive in Alamosa), purple flax (*Linum lewisii* – reliably return each year), and purple poppy mallows (*Callirhoe involucrate*).

In the next column I'll discuss flowers for the rest of the season and also make suggestions for flowers bees avoid. You might have an allergy or have had a bad experience with bees. Or you might want to discourage bees from hanging around your outside dining area.

Happy Earth Day!

"Gardening adds years to your life and life to your years." Unknown