

Peacefully coexisting with bees and other pollinators

by Lori Athey, Habitat Outreach Coordinator

Our bees and butterflies are all struggling to survive – have you heard about the crashing Monarch populations or colony collapse disorder? Without pollinators our food supply would be in serious danger. The good news is that you can make a difference by planting native plants. But I know what you are thinking – I don't want to get stung! However getting stung is a lot harder than it looks. In all my years of gardening, I have only been stung because of my own stupidity. I have stepped on bees while walking barefoot, I have accidentally grabbed a bee while reaching for a flower, and once I even sat on a bee. Ouch! But you can learn from my mistakes:

Bees and Wasps 101

Just like a starving boy at an all-you-can-eat buffet, when bees and wasps are collecting pollen, food is the only thing on their mind. They only sting in self-defense, so stay out of their way and avoid touching them and they won't bother you. Honey bees really don't want to sting you, because the act of stinging rips out their abdomen, killing them. Bigger bees and wasps may look scary (looking scary is their primary defense) but they are not likely to sting unless forced to. Many smaller bees are actually flies, which cannot sting at all. Only Yellow Jackets and Hornets tend to be aggressive and quick to sting if you get in their way – and if you know what they look like, you can easily avoid them.

Working and playing in the garden

The crawling and flying visitors to your garden are looking for food, not a fight, but will retaliate if stepped on. Wear closed-toe shoes and gloves, or pay careful attention to where you put your bare hands and feet. One way to avoid bees is to garden in the morning or late afternoon when bees are less likely to be present. Wear a hat, avoid fragrances, and avoid brightly colored clothing. Avoid drinking sugary drinks from open cups or cans, and cover outdoor garbage cans with tightly fitting lids.

If a bee or wasp approaches you, STAY STILL, do not scream or wave your arms around, as these actions make them think you are a threat. Gently blow or brush them away or wait for them to leave on their own. They are seeking food, so unless you are holding a sugary drink, they will lose interest quickly.





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Garden design suggestions

Avoid placing pollinator-attracting plants near high-contact areas such as beside walks, doors, sitting areas, play areas and driveways. Instead, edge these areas with grasses, ferns, conifers and other foliage plants that are not as attractive to bees. Flowers for bees and butterflies can be safely planted a few feet away from the edge of high-contact areas without a problem. If you want to support the pollinators but keep them out of reach, plant pollinator-attracting plants in the middle or back of your beds or try some of the taller flowers such as *Eutrochium* (Joe-Pye), *Veronicastrum virginicum* (Culver's Root) and *Helianthus* (Perennial Sunflowers). Also shrubs and trees such as *Cephalanthus* (Button Bush), *Aesculus parviflora* (Bottlebrush Buckeye), *Sambucus nigra* (Elderberry), *Clethra alnifolia* (Summersweet, not dwarf selections), *Magnolia virginiana* (Sweetbay), and *Tilia americana* (American Basswood) all have beautiful flowers that are attractive to pollinators, but well out of reach of careless fingers. You can find these plants and more at the Delaware Nature Society's annual Native Plant Sale.

Taking care of the bees and butterflies

HOLD THE BUG SPRAY and unplug your UV mosquito-zapper; 98 percent of the insects they kill are good guys! These beneficial insects will keep pest bugs under control and are also food for many birds, bats, toads and other wildlife. Poisons kill ALL the insects they touch not just the problem bugs, and pesticide residues can remain on plants for weeks or even months. If a particular plant is overeaten, consider planting more of that plant so that both you and the insects can enjoy it. We need the bees to pollinate our fruits and veggies, while the birds depend on caterpillars and other insects to feed their young.

If you get stung

If you are stung by a bee or wasp, don't panic. Immediate pain, followed by itching, redness or a raised welt are all perfectly normal. Only about 3 percent of adults and 0.5 percent of children experience full-blown allergies leading to anaphylaxis, which can be life-threatening, and require emergency treatment. The first step following a bee sting is to remove the stinger as soon as possible. Using a fingernail and without squeezing it, carefully scrape it out. Once removed, pain and swelling can be reduced with a cold compress. Topical antihistamine creams can also provide much relief.

That is all there is to it. Now that you know what to do, call a truce with your pollinators and peacefully enjoy your garden. You can find lots of native plants to support a wide variety of pollinators at Delaware Nature Society's annual Native Plant Sale located at their Coverdale Farm Preserve, 543 Way Road in Greenville, DE. Coming up April 30 through May 3, you can find information and the catalog of available plants at www.delnature.org/NativePlantSale.

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