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Here's the buzz

Bee-friendly gardens help create floral beauty, healthy produce and a vibrant ecology, but a host of threats now endangers the venerable honey bee

By Teresa O'Connor, Correspondent
May 27, 2005

As Angel Lindenlaub strolled among the flowers in her garden recently, several bees buzzed near the aromatic roses, salvia, lavender, poppies and penstemon. The professional landscape designer and master gardener could not have been more pleased.

Lindenlaub, owner of Heaven on Earth Design in Thousand Oaks, became fascinated with bees two years ago when an ominous-looking hive formed in her front yard.

She began observing the insects' behavior. When Santa Ana



Dave Getzchman

A bee alights on a white rose in the frontyard garden of Angel Lindenlaub, communing above in her Thousand Oaks backyard.



An expert in bee gardening, Lindenlaub recommends purple, blue and white flowers for attracting bees; she also recommends flowering fruit trees.

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winds knocked down the hive, she urged local beekeepers to rescue the bees.

"It broke my heart to see that hive destroyed," she said. "That's when I started to learn about bees. I hadn't realized how important bees are to our ecology. Certain foods would never come to the table without bees."

It's hard to imagine a world without bees. Apples, almonds, pears and berries are among the plants relying on these insects for their lives.

Virtually all flowering plants require animals for pollination, and bees are the hardest-working pollinators. Even self-pollinating crops, such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplants, tend to produce higher-quality fruit when cross-pollinated by bees.

Bees are nature's star pollinator, but few people realize their importance, according to Mike Vaughan, who was a commercial beekeeper in Ojai for more than 25 years.

"Even cheese needs bees," said Vaughan, who will lead a presentation on beekeeping on Saturday at the Wheeler Gorge Visitors Center near Ojai. "Alfalfa seed is pollinated by bees, and that seed grows to hay, which is bought by farmers for cows that produce milk for cheese."

Lots of challenges

Unfortunately, bees are in serious trouble. More than half of the nation's honey bees have been killed by an Asian parasite known as Varroa mites, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Decades of rampant pesticide use and urban development have only compounded the problem.

Scott Hoffman Black believes the secret lies in increasing native bees.

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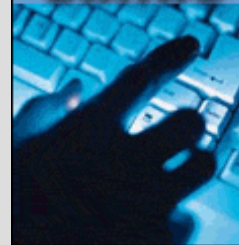
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Black is executive director of the Xerces Society, a Portland, Ore.-based invertebrate conservation organization.

The European honey bee is the best-known species, Black said, but there are about 4,000 native bee species in the United States, and up to 1,500 species around California. "All plants were once pollinated by native bees," he said. "It wasn't until the 1950s and the advent of large mono-culture farms that many native bees were killed off, and commercial honey bees used for pollination."

Bringing back bees

Want to help? Increasing native bees in your garden relies on three factors: nest sites, floral resources and limited pesticide use. Unlike honey bees, most native bees are solitary insects.

About 60 percent nest in the ground, about a foot beneath the soil. "Some ground-nesting bees are very small," Black said. "People rarely notice them, or mistake them for ants."

Leave a patch of loose soil untouched and surrounded by clumps of vegetation in your garden. These bees like sandy loam that dries quickly.

About 35 percent of native bees nest in old wood -- a problem in our suburban environments, where there aren't many dead trees lying around.

You can make nests for native bees by boring different-sized holes in lumber.

Diverse sources of nectar and pollen are critical. "Select plants that bloom at different times throughout the year to keep local hives stimulated," he said. "When there isn't enough nectar, bees stop laying eggs."

Native plants are better at attracting native bees, because they evolved together, Black said. But older varieties of flowers and herbs, like lavender, rosemary, calendula and cosmos, are also good bee attractors. "Some new hybrids don't have nectar or pollen," he warned. "They look nice, but they won't attract bees."

Avoid pesticides, wherever possible. Bees need only a tiny amount to be affected. If you get pesticides on the flowers, bees may take pesticide-laden pollen back to the nest and kill the eggs. If you must spray, do so in the evening or on overcast days, when bees aren't around. Pay careful attention to usage instructions.

-- Teresa O'Connor is a master gardener and freelance writer from

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