Bee Kind to Pollinators

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This past June gardeners and planters observed Pollinator month. Specifically June 15-21 is National Pollinator week. Who knew? Pollinators are those animals and insects that help nature carry out the process of pollination, the reproduction of plants. This process is very important to the agriculture industry because pollination is an important factor in the yields that farmers and gardeners will get from their fields. Pollination is where pollen grains (male) are transferred to the ovule (female) of a plant. Pollination is an irreplaceable step in the reproduction of seed plants. Many fruit and flowering plants as well would not develop and would die out if not pollinated. Apple, blueberry, peach, pumpkins, melons, cucumbers, and squash are some plants that need to be pollinated to produce fruit. According to Penn State Extension, bees are the most efficient pollinators because of their instinctive pollen hoarding nature and the fact that they colonize in large numbers.

Not as widely known is that birds and bats are also important animals in the pollination process. Plants that depend on pollination by birds commonly have bright red, orange or yellow flowers with very little scent. The Audubon Society suggest that to attract birds to your yard or garden you should plant flower varieties such as sunflowers, milkweed, marigolds, coralbells, beebalm, penstemons, scarlet sage, and all wild flowers native to Texas. According to the Audubon Society this is because birds have a keen sense of sight for color but have a poor sense of smell as one might imagine. Bird pollinated flowers produce pollen that is large enough and sticky enough to cling to the feathers of birds. Hummingbirds, which everyone wants to occasionally see in their garden are the most common pollinating bird species. Their long curved beaks and love for nectar make them the ideal pollinator. Hummingbirds burn a tremendous amount of energy as they fly with super-fast wing beats, up to eighty times per second looking for those plants that have the most nectar giving them the most reward for their pollinating effort. Hummingbirds like bees seem to have the natural instinct to pollinate.

This article about pollination would be incomplete if I failed to mention butterflies. Farmers and gardeners alike count on them to help in the pollination process. Like hummingbirds they too provide spectacle and mystique to any garden. Butterflies love the bright color that some annuals and perennials can produce. The Audubon Society suggests planting bright flowers in your garden that will feed and attract butterflies making it more likely that your flower and vegetable gardens are sufficiently pollinated.

At Blodgett Urban Gardens, where I am vice president, we had a bit of a surprise when we discovered that our efforts to maximize pollination in our garden, would attract and feed a new bird species to our garden. The master gardeners in our organization decided that we

would plant sun flowers of different varieties to attract bees and other pollinators to the garden plus add some color at the same time.

Many of you have may have seen green parakeets flying around your yards similar in appearance, size and color to the ones you may have had as a childhood pet.Those of you that are native to the Houston area know that this parakeet species has not always been around. As it turns out these parakeets are descendants of individuals that escaped as they were being imported for commercial sale. According to Lisa Gray of the Houston Chronicle, large numbers of these birds, called monk parakeets were imported to North America from Argentina starting in the 1960's. Technically these parakeets are an invasive species but so far there is no evidence that they are displacing any native bird species or doing any damage to the natural order of the area. That is not to say that everyone is happy to spot them and marvel at their charismatic behavior. The monk parakeet is a communal nesting bird. That means that these birds nest in pairs and have as many as twenty or more pairs in a nest. Their communal nest have been known to be as large as the bed of a truck. In the wild this species builds its communal nest mostly atop large dead trees in the rainforest but since this urban landscape is short on large dead trees, the parakeets have adapted to building their nests atop cell phone and high power line structures much to the dismay of power transmitters and cell phone tower owners. Blodgett Urban Gardens on the campus of Texas Southern University, happens to be directly across the street from a power transmission site complete with high wire towers where a flock of monk parakeets reside. To our surprise the monks are very fond of sunflower seeds and have been seen taking the whole sunflower in order to get the seeds. Our lesson was that we planted sunflowers to attract bees for pollination and ended up attracting and providing a food source for a bird species that is still finding its place in its new environment.

Concrete Crushing Facilities

Jacqueline Smith, PhD

The majority of concrete crushing facilities are located near minority communities. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) has received two applications for air permits pertaining to concrete crushing facilities, one each in Districts 141 and 142. The TCEQ has received public opposition to the issuance and renewal of these air permits. The ECJ Committee will continue to monitor the status of these applications.