

Pollinator Playground

Reviving your yard with a handpicked selection of handsome native plants can provide a beautiful boost to birds and pollinators without creating a salad bar for urban deer.

By Mike McTee

Chunk! Chunk! Chunk! Chunk!

The sod cutter whined as its blade sliced through my lawn like a block of cheese. Its motor pulled me toward the fence, where I wrestled the machine 180 degrees to cut the next section.

My buddy Brad was busy rolling up the strips of sod and stacking them next to the sidewalk where I'd placed a "free" sign. Neighbors quickly appeared, thankful for patches to cover the dead spots their dogs had left in their lawns during the winter.

After a couple hours of work, swaths of bare dirt hugged the sidewalk.

My goal was couch appeal over curb appeal.

I'd long dreamed of restoring a patch of land, but never imagined it being within city limits. I kept hearing about widespread bee declines and began to wonder if maybe the 500-square-foot patch of dirt my wife and I owned was actually my chance to improve wildlife habitat.

After I shared my dream with a biologist friend, she sent me a pollinator scorecard ranking the most valuable flowers for bees. Based on data from the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, researchers created a list of nine native plants that together support 80 percent of the local bee species. The trick was to offer a buffet of blossoms staggered to last from just after spring snowmelt through summer.

Along with hunting and other outdoor pursuits, I'm also a birder and naturalist, so I talked to a landscaper about what native plants would provide privacy and boost habitat for birds and pollinators.

He recommended planting junipers and curl-leaf mountain mahogany for an evergreen hedge with Rocky Mountain maple

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mixed in for a dash of deciduous color. Once Brad and I peeled back the grass and planted the shrubs, the view immediately improved, but the job seemed unfinished.

Wild rose, blanket flower, and other natives top the list of pollinator favorites, but also less-obvious species such as willow and kinnikinnick are favored for their unique trait of flowering early in the spring when many plants are barely showing signs of life.

Like a kid with Pokémon cards, I wanted to collect them all. I began prowling local nurseries, skipping past exotics like catmint and Russian sage. Although they draw pollinators, especially non-native European honeybees, native bees would find the highest quality pollen from the plants they evolved alongside.

I also planted native bunchgrasses. Though grasses wouldn't offer pollen to bees, their dense stems and thatch would provide shelter and nesting habitat for insects.

Six weeks later my landscaping hobby had snowballed into obsession. I was still spreading mulch and shopping for increasingly obscure plants, and I'd begun growing natives in containers for later transplant. Though neighbors complimented our yard, my concerns were beginning to pile up. Deer were slurping kinnikinnick stems like spaghetti. Cheatgrass were sprouting, keeping me extra busy pulling weeds. Distracted by my yard projects, I'd hardly touched my fly rod all spring, and I still had to figure out irrigation and edging. My neighbor Rich, who'd converted his front yard into a lush aspen grove, reminded me that native landscaping projects are always a roll of the dice.

Then one afternoon as I sat on the couch overlooking my habitat experiment, my eye caught a flash of blue and rusty orange streaking into the bunchgrasses. I stood, and my eyes saucered open as I realized a lazuli bunting was searching the mulch for a meal.

Here was one of Montana's most colorful creatures, a songbird that is practically glued to brushy hillsides and draws, foraging only steps from my sidewalk. My concerns evaporated as another thought filled the brain space: *I'd better dig up more lawn.*

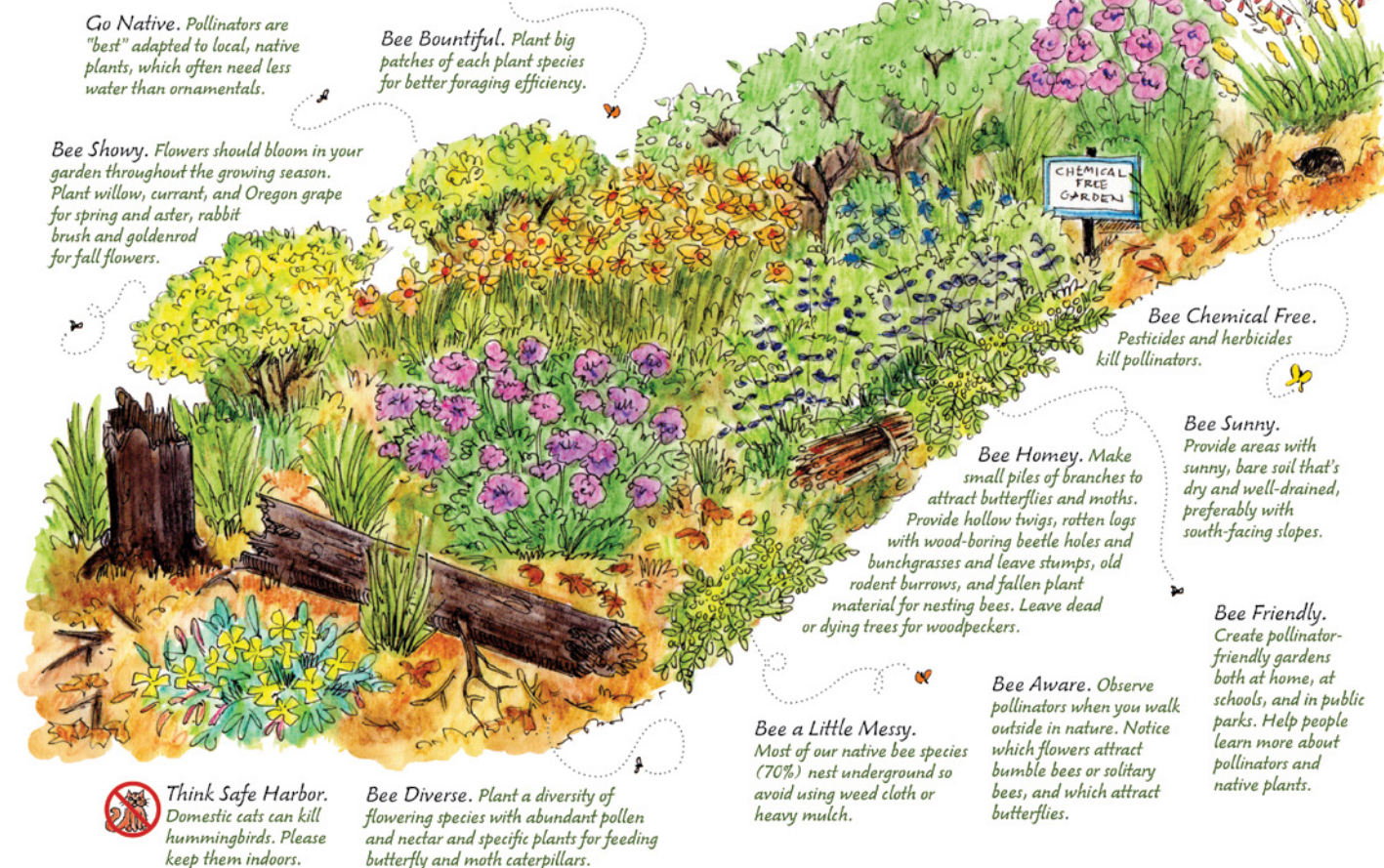
I persuaded my wife that our next big goal should be growing a thicket—a minor tangle of branches around the aspen trunks where a chickadee might escape a pursuing Cooper's hawk or glean insects from branches. I began by scalping the lawn along our backyard fence line. My 3-year-old son combed through soil clods, picking out grubs fatter than his thumb, stones wider than his head, and a lone vertebra of unspecified origin. When I planted the shrubs, I did my best to explain the role of each species, how chokecherries were irresistible to robins and how Oregon grape offered early season pollen. We only needed to set the stage for the concert.

Two seasons have since passed. Passersby pause to admire the 6-foot stems of Great Basin wild rye that arch over the sidewalk. Chipping sparrows hop between fescues searching for seeds. Clematis vines weave through our shadowbox fence into the neighbor's jurisdiction. Bumble bees bask among the wild rose blossoms as crab spiders don pink camouflage to match their hideouts. Skipper butterflies fold and spread their wings while sipping nectar from lemon-yellow bouquets of rabbitbrush flowers.

In short, we managed to transform our lawn from an ecological desert into a playground for pollinators and a buffet for birds. Though whitetails now bed between our living room and the native landscaping, concealed from the street but not from us, they seldom nibble the beebalm, rabbitbrush, fleabane, and other deer-undesirables we chose to plant.

Hordes of weeds have yet to invade.

Planning your garden — think like a pollinator.



Planting to Promote Pollinators

Early Season

- Bebb's willow (*Salix bebbiana*)
- Oregon grape (*Berberis repens*)
- Kinnikinnick berry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)

Middle Season

- Wood's rose (*Rosa woodsii*)
- Silky lupine (*Lupinus sericeus*)
- Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*)

Late Season

- Blanketflower (*Gaillardia aristata*)
- Showy fleabane (*Erigeron speciosus*)
- Smooth aster (*Symphotrichum foliaceum*)

For more, visit xerces.org/plant-lists/.

Native Landscaping Tips

- Start small so the project doesn't become overwhelming. You can always expand later.
- Prepare your site by removing all existing plant material, especially roots.
- Choose native plants that match site conditions and bloom at different times during the growing season.
- Apply a thick mulch layer between plants to suppress weeds.
- Irrigate grasses and forbs only the first season. Excess water favors weeds.
- For additional resources and a list of nurseries that carry native plants, visit the Montana Native Plant Society's website at mtnativeplants.org/.