

Going Natural



Read a firsthand experience of successful methods to attract birds, butterflies and bees.

By Mel Toellner

Your customers look to you and trust you for advice on what to plant, what to use in their yards and homes and how to get their desired results.

I hope that the thoughts and recommendations I “plant” in your mind in this article encourage you to recommend that your customers take a “natural approach” in both the plants they might choose to add to their yard or properties and the approach they take to fertilization and insect and weed control.

Let’s start with the “fun stuff” — plants! When people come to my home in Missouri and ask, “Why do you have so many birds, bees and butterflies?” I always start with “plants.”

Yes, I own one of the largest suppliers of wild bird feeders, seed and houses in North America, and I’m often testing 20+ feeders in my yard. But, I have no doubt it’s our planting of “native” trees and bushes that leads to both the diversity and the quantity of birds, butterflies and bees on our property. God put “natives”

here, and they are created in a way that you and I don’t need to do much except stay out of the way. They need little supplement and can stand heat, cold and other weather stress. I sincerely believe you will build long-term customer happiness, satisfaction and loyalty to your business by recommending natives that are right for your market.

I find that many native plants are good for all I care about — pollinators, butterflies, bees and birds. I’ll start with a couple of suggestions that pollinators particularly love, as the challenges of bees in our environment are getting a lot of needed attention.

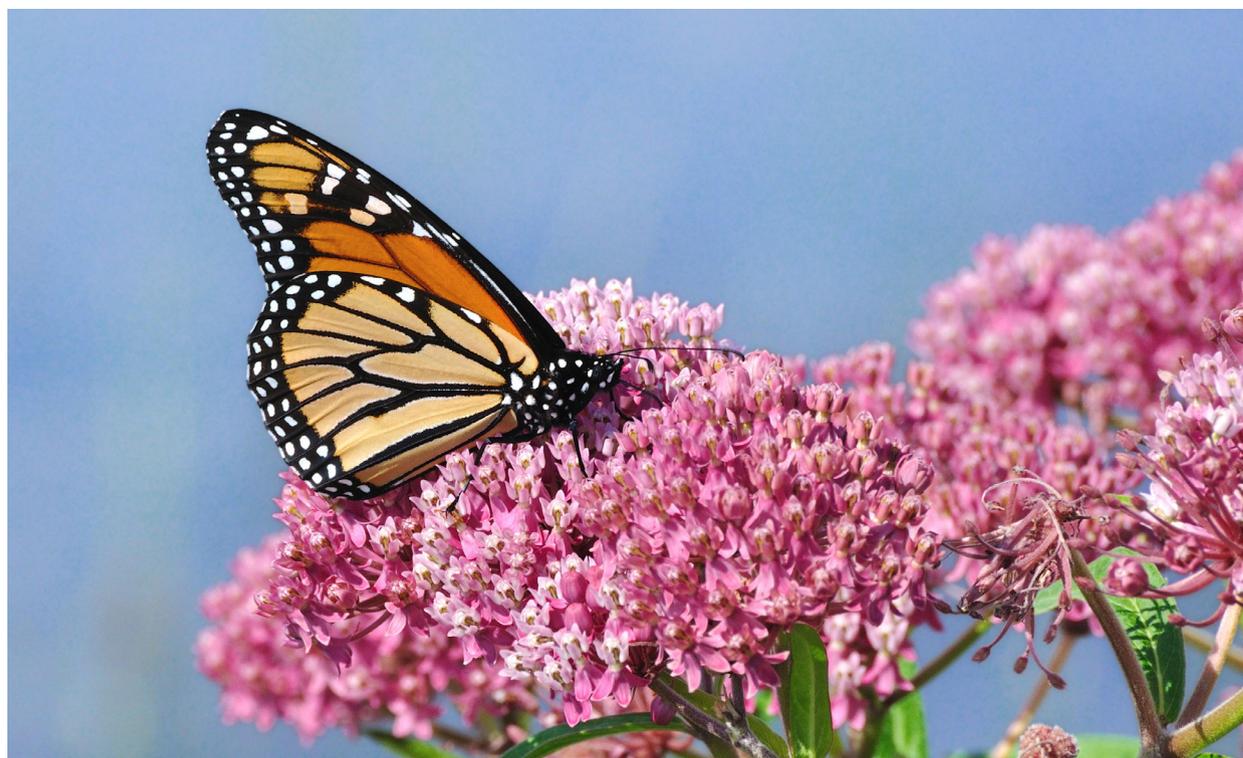
The key is offering plants that bloom at different times. I love columbines and Blue False Indigo for early blossoms.

My favorite natives to provide blossoms from July into August include purple coneflower, bee balm (monarda), common milkweed, and butterfly weed. The milkweed and butterfly weed are some of the plants that are sources of food for monarch butterflies.

In damp soil, I love cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and in an average to medium moisture you can’t beat Joe-Pye Weed, which grows up to 7 feet tall and has huge flower heads that butterflies love during August into late September. A bonus I appreciate is that many birds love the seed head of coneflowers and Joe-Pye, and if you leave stems uncut or a few feet high, as the stems hollow out, several species of our native bees will utilize the stems for homes.

Natural Control

If using native plants is the right hand to success in the variety and quantity of the birds, butterflies, bees and critters on the property, a natural approach to pest and weed control is the critical left hand to success.





When we built our new home several years ago I reached out to our local expert on “natural” lawn care. He taught me that in the grass part of our several acre bird gardens, I don’t need the widely sold “four different bags-applications” per year approach that I felt critical to a beautiful lawn. The results of my old approach were huge amounts of chemicals and added commercial fertilizers.

I know many of you sell four bag programs that many customers have grown to like and that are important to your sales and gross profits. Having said that, I must remind you of the growing number of consumers like me that are looking for a “chemical-free” approach to lawn care.

While I’m motivated by what going chemical free does to improve my native birds, butterflies and bees, the fact that my grandchildren and pets are safe sitting and rolling in the grass makes me even more convinced the “natural approach” is best. I’ve personally gone to three to four applications of all-natural corn gluten granules per year. It has been for an ole country boy, an eye-opening experience.

Corn gluten has chemical properties that keep crab grass and weeds from germinating while encouraging good soil microbial growth. I’m getting more convinced every day that paying attention to soil microbials is as or more important than N, P and K levels.

Have customers combine corn gluten usage with keeping their grass 4 inches high, and the results are amazing. I have lots of friends who are now corn gluten disciples.

Another amazing natural product I use lots of in my beds is cotton burr compost. While providing

Take 5

Bird Man Mel has started work on a book focusing at this time on the three B’s – Birds, Bees and Butterflies and welcomes your suggestions. It will have an emphasis on getting children and all of us to rediscover the outdoors and set down electronic devices for at least part of the day. As part of that message, he’s launching a “Take 5” campaign. Encourage your customers to sit each day and take five minutes to just sit and observe the breathtaking sights and sounds of nature around them. Want to reserve a signed copy of his new book? Just drop him an email at mel@birdmanmel.com.

the mulch I want for weed control and moisture conservation, it breaks down over time and adds to the organic matter in my beds and around my trees and shrubs. This gives much superior results to wood mulch, which adds little organic matter and often ties up key nutrients. Have your customers try cotton burr compost — they’ll love the results. Just to make sure you know I speak from the heart, I do not make or have any commercial reward for recommending corn gluten and cotton burr compost.

Disappearing Insects

I want to close with a real concern. This concern led me to write this article about native plants and natural weed and pest control. Much press has been generated about the increasing decline in flying insect species like honey bees, monarch butterflies and fireflies. But now there is also evidence of declines in non-charismatic insect species of various moths, flies, beetles and even non-insects like spiders.

Several groups, including one prominent research group in the U.K., the Krefeld Entomology Society, that has been running insect traps for decades have noticed an 80 to 90 percent decline in their trap of total insect biomass the last several years versus the 1980s. Huge increase in herbicide use and insecticide use are suspected and documented reasons for the decline.

Think about it: I don’t know about you, but I saw less insect splats on my windshield and saw even less mosquitoes last summer. Did you? Ask me if I care. I do. Why? Because tree swallows, purple martins and dozens of insect-eating birds, and even the fish you love to catch, are all dependent upon a healthy and vibrant insect ecosystem.

We saw similar decreases and then increases in insect populations when DDT was introduced in the 1940s and then withdrawn in the 1980s. You and I can’t by ourselves change what insecticides are used throughout the world.

We can, however, affect the environment that we control around our homes, ponds and lakes. You can make a difference by recommending your customers go natural with plants they add to their environment and utilizing natural means of insect and weed control. 🌱

Mel Toellner, “Bird Man Mel,” has a passion for birding and backyard nature and is president of Gold Crest Distributing. He can be reached at mel@birdmanmel.com.

cute as a BUTTON



GARDENIA ‘BUTTONS’

This low-growing Gardenia lives up to its name with abundant, 2” semi-double flowers and a button-like center. Extremely fragrant, heat-tolerant and does well in containers and in the landscape.

Fast to finish

Extremely fragrant

Wows at retail

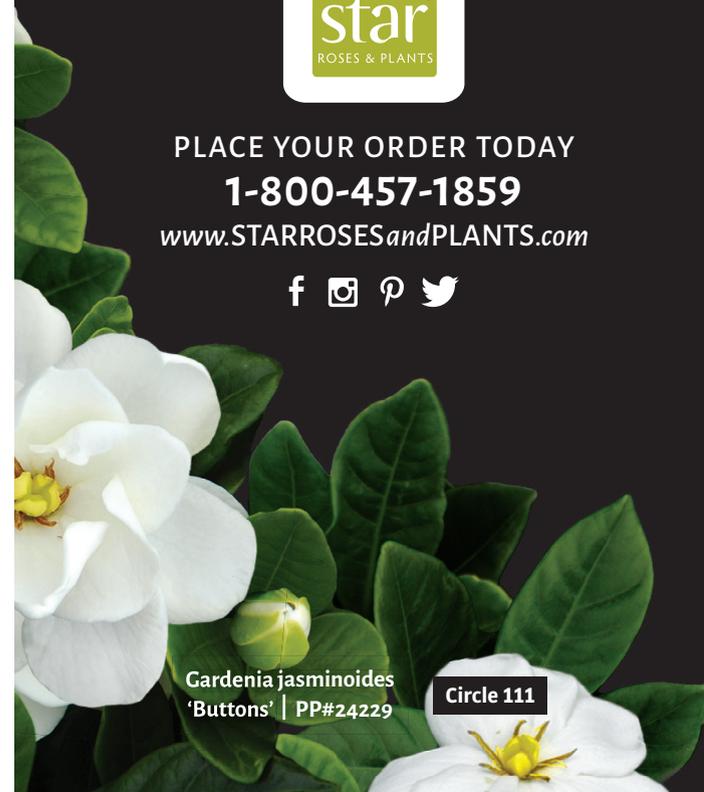
Abundance of blooms



PLACE YOUR ORDER TODAY

1-800-457-1859

www.STARROSESandPLANTS.com



Gardenia jasminoides
‘Buttons’ | PP#24229

Circle 111