

The Potential in Pollinators

Set the record straight about the current state of honeybees and pollinators, and learn how one garden center joined the cause.

By Lauren Snyder

We have unseasonably warm temperatures, summits on climate change, a pope who preaches about the environment as passionately as he preaches about the poor and purveying trends of “organic” and “local.”

This awakening awareness among the population at large concerning environmental issues could prove to be garden retailers’ most significant opportunity of the season.

Most notably is the growing realization that the environment we thought we simply lived in is one that we must actually interact with.

Taking center stage with these operative environmental issues are our constant collaborators — the pollinators.

Pollinators are once again proving themselves allies of the industry by guiding the environmentally conscious to the doors of garden centers, where the answers to the plight of the pollinators lies in food and forage. And what is food and forage for pollinators other than the plants sitting on our benches?

The State of Things

A final, conclusive answer regarding the honeybee crisis specifically has been elusive.

Nutrition, queen failure, genetic weakness, misuse of pesticides, parasites, disease, beekeeping practices, weather patterns, habitat and forage loss, and misinformation all have contributed to the current situation.

Regarding the contentious topic of neonicotinoids, the prevailing answer is that neonics seem to affect honeybees’ susceptibility to viruses and pathogens spread by Varroa mites.

For example, in Australia where neonics are a common pesticide, there are no Varroa mites, and the honeybees have not seen a decline. But in Europe where neonics have been banned and the presence of Varroa mites prevails, honeybees have still suffered in similar ways as in the United States.

Many initiatives are set on solving the challenge of honeybee decline, colony collapse disorder and pollinator health. Key resources in these initiatives include programs and forums to provide information and support, such as “Grow Wise, Bee Smart” from the Horticultural Research Institute, the research arm of AmericanHort.

This initiative focuses on funding, leveraging and directing research to answer key questions and guide future answers regarding honeybees and pollinators alike. More than ever, it is apparent that data and research are necessary in this arena

to provide solutions with as much foundational knowledge and awareness as possible.

Another such industry-led initiative is the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge, founded by eight national associations.

This is an unprecedented level of collaboration and effort by national, regional and local clubs and associations whose coalition is called the National Pollinator Garden Network. Of these, AmericanHort, National Garden Bureau and American Public Gardens Association have all risen up to represent both the industry and consumers alike.

The goal of the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge lies explicitly within its name, that is, to achieve 1 million registered pollinator gardens by the end of 2016.

This consumer-facing effort empowers individuals to take action by planting plants — in whatever form or fashion that makes sense, whether it’s entire landscapes or a simple window box — that support pollinators and then registering their “gardens” online.

This is where industry businesses can step up to be the local thought leader and the solution taskmaster, encouraging the population at large to form solutions, not just opinions. The success of this initiative lies within efforts taken by garden retailers



to support and advocate the program to consumers.

The Hope of Opportunity

Those reading thus far should have hopefully fixated on the keywords above: habitat, food, forage and garden.

While the answers may prove to be complex, solutions are not.

The industry has been presented with an opportunity to make a positive impact, cultivate common ground among environmentalists and industry and promote the products on our benches

that provide vital ecosystem services — all because our pollinator partners need support, protection and advocacy to continue their vital environmental role.

The first step is education, both for business and consumers alike. Resources are plentiful to stay abreast of advancements in answers and research, but history is just as valuable.

For example, a wonderful report from the USDA Forest Service and Pollinator Partnership Publication titled “Bee Basics, An Introduction to Our Native Bees,” details how honeybees are not our

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Taking Action

No one has seen a role for garden retail more clearly defined in the world of pollinator health and awareness than Greenscape Gardens and Gifts out of St. Louis, Missouri. Backed by a track record of programs and strategies that have shown both success for pollinators and sales, their example swarms with ideas for garden retailers across the country.

For those ready to take action on this opportunity, they must do so wholeheartedly, ready to assume a commanding role in advocating that plants and gardening matter, especially from an ecosystem perspective.

It's not just aesthetics, and it's not just a hobby — the products on garden retail benches are a necessity, and this is the mantra businesses must confidently march to moving forward.

Greenscape Gardens has made this statement prevalent throughout their business. Plants are merchandised based on purpose and functionality, especially regarding pollinators.

One look at their benches, and a customer can see exactly what a plant will do in their garden, whether it's serving as a pollinator host plant, nectar source, native advantage or butterfly and hummingbird attractant.

Plants are only one part of the puzzle. Next is engaging and getting consumers excited.

Many (likely most) aren't aware of how their plant purchases make a statement — whether negative or positive — about their support of pollinators. Greenscape Gardens addressed this issue by giving away 5,000

landscape-sized plugs of different milkweed species at checkout.

This initiated a conversation about why milkweed is important (especially regarding monarch butterflies, another pollinator who is popular as a pollinator in crisis) and how consumers can make a difference.

The results of this project were a 24.5 percent increase in gross sales, 10 percent increase in consumer count, and 10 percent average sale increase. Not to mention the priceless word-of-mouth marketing that this program purchased for the garden center (or the increased food source provided for monarchs).

Another factor for garden retailers to consider is engaging the community at large to take action. A drive to register pollinator gardens under the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge banner could bring a community together with businesses and homeowners alike taking part.

Workshops and classes on creating a perfect pollinator menu would also rally support. Even brief 5- to 10-minute demonstrations on a busy Saturday in May of the lifecycle of a butterfly and the role of asclepias furthers the goal of education and action (and engages those kiddos, another bonus).

The take-home message here is that garden centers have the plants, customers have the plots, and together, pollinators can be supported on a national and significant level because the industry stepped up to help.



native allies when it comes to pollination and serving our local ecosystems.

Rather, 4,000 native bee species carried the continent until European settlement brought honeybee hives. The ambitious honeybee quickly assumed the prevailing role of pollination, leaving native bees and pollinators the humble role of supporting actor.

As remarkable as the honeybee has been in agriculture, horticulture and cultivation, it has not been a flawless rock star. Rather, the honeybee has evolutionary challenges when it comes to perfectly pollinating many crops such as tomato or eggplant.

Our native pollinators, however, don't suffer from these challenges and are better equipped to pollinate many of our native crops.

This key piece of science, biology and history is a vital point in helping consumers realize that saving the honeybee could do just as much service as supporting native pollinators.

The second step is communication. Armed with insight and knowledge, garden retailers can begin communicating the facts of the situation and thus combat the overwhelming pervasiveness of misinformation. How?

Share validated articles and resources on social media, provide signage and pamphlets in-store and even offer brief classes and workshops. Many consumers won't know what they don't know unless otherwise told.

The final step in this opportunistic recipe is action.

Pollinators, ecosystem health and horticulture are inexplicably intertwined. Garden retailers can be the golden thread in this triple combination by taking action this season to create awareness and cause positive change.

Initially, this requires backend decisions regarding a plant selection that benefits pollinators and a strong marketing/merchandising strategy that communicates the benefits of available plants.

All images provided by Mary Bammer at the Honey Bee Research Lab, University of Florida.

Promotion and awareness are critical components in this final stage, and this is finally where attention turns.

Accepting the Challenge

Ideas are out there for creative garden retailers committed to the cause of pollinators. And the timing is ripe to rise to the challenge. Whether the choice is to focus on honeybees, monarchs, native pollinators or all of the above, garden retailers will find the support and information they need to take action (visit www.growwise.org, www.millionpollinatorgardens.org, www.xerces.org, www.pollinator.org and many more).

From "Milkweeds for Monarchs" to pollinator gardens and pollinator planters to native bee hotels and honeybee hives, possibilities to take action are ready and waiting.



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For the garden retailer willing to accept the challenge, your enthusiasm and optimism to make a difference won't just help turn the tide on pollinator crises, but it will also engage consumers in a meaningful way with far-reaching and amazing results. **LGR**

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