

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

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Bumblebees—Excellent Pollinators

Honeybees, brought to this country by the first colonists, expanded as settlers moved west. As domestic hives swarmed many wild populations of honeybees were established throughout North America. In recent years however, honeybees have developed many problems with disease and mites. Beekeepers have struggled with various remedies to control such problems in their domesticated hives, but wild honeybees have not fared well. In the United States more than 90% of wild hives have disappeared. Such harsh realities emphasize the importance of native bees that are not affected by such problems. Bumblebees, along with other native North American bees, are instrumental in pollinating our natural world. Many plants, shrubs and trees depend on bees to pollinate their flowers for the production of fruits, nuts and seeds that feed wildlife and allow regeneration of our forests and grasslands.

Bumblebees are excellent pollinators. Their tongues are longer than honeybees and so are much better at pollinating deep-throated flowers; tomato and bell pepper plants, for example, are more successfully pollinated by bumblebees. Scientists have found that pollination of tomatoes can reach near 100% if pollinated by bumblebees. According to Dr. Mike Stanghellini, Research Associate in the Department of Entomology at North Carolina State University, two strains of bumblebees have been commercially domesticated for use in pollinating greenhouse tomato and bell pepper plants. Bumblebee nests are used world wide in such greenhouse environments. The bumblebee colonies spend their lives in greenhouses, building hives in boxes equipped with a small opening for entrance and exit.

Bumblebees are among many native bees however, who have suffered from loss of habitat due to industrial and residential expansion. We who live in residential areas can help by planting gardens with early flowers to help young queens get started and a succession of flowering shrubs, trees and plants help sustain bees throughout the growing season. Most native bees, including bumblebees, are docile and will not sting except in their own defense. If you find a nesting site in your yard be sure that everyone in the family knows where it is so it can be left undisturbed.

Take a moment or two to observe bumblebees as they dabble from one nodding flower to the next. Unaware of their importance they gather their bits of nectar and pollen, unwittingly empowering each blossom visited to fulfill its purpose, enabling both human and critter to the feast on fruits that follow.