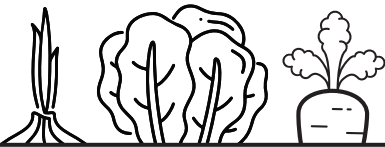


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Islanders learn how to help pollinators

By Winifred Bird

For anyone who doubts the power of pollinators, Island beekeeper Sue Dompke, owner of Sweet Mountain Farm, suggests a simple thought experiment: Imagine planting three watermelon seeds in a 10-square-foot area. Without pollination, you might harvest three or four melons. With pollination, you'll get 10 or 12. The same goes for hundreds of the world's most beloved and important food crops.

Recently, Islanders had a chance to learn practical strategies for supporting pollinators at a lecture by Donna Stine, eastern Wisconsin apiary inspector with the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). Stine was on the Island to inspect Dompke's hives, and Dompke partnered with the Art and Nature Center and Gathering Ground, an agriculture-focused nonprofit on the Island, to host Stine's event on June 6.

Stine said both domesticated and wild bees are crucial pollinators in Wisconsin. The state has over 400 species of bees, many of which nest in the ground or in hollow stems and do not form large colonies like domesticated honeybees.

"Your yard may be a bee's whole world," she told an audience of about 15 at the Art and Nature Center.

Pollinators have been declining globally in recent decades, scientists say. A 2017 study by the Center

for Biological Diversity found that over half of native bee species in North America with enough data to assess were declining. In Wisconsin, declining species include the rusty-patched bumble bee, yellow-banded bumble bee, and American bumble bee.

"Bees dying reflects a flowerless landscape and a dysfunctional food system," explained University of Minnesota entomologist Marla Spivak in a TED talk on pollinators. With fewer farmers planting flowering cover crops like clover and alfalfa and more applying large amounts of herbicides and pesticides, much of rural America has become an "agricultural food desert" for bees, she said.

Stine shared many strategies for Island residents to reverse that trend on their own land: leave things a little messy so pollinators have places to nest, plant native flowers, let herbs and even weeds burst into bloom, and choose less-toxic pesticides. Since many pollinators rely on specific host plants for food, she recommends checking the Great Lakes pollinator plant list created by the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation (available at xerces.org) as you plan your garden.

If you're worried that neighbors might complain about the untidy landscaping that bees prefer, she suggested putting up a sign labeling

it habitat.

"A sign is sometimes all it takes to let people know you're not neglecting the landscape, you're making a choice," she said.

That's not to say pollinator gardens can't be attractive. Dompke



State apiary inspector Donna Stine gave a talk on pollinators during a recent visit to the Island.

recently worked with Gathering Ground interns to plant a pretty patch of lavender, yellow yarrow, sedum, and other bee-friendly perennials in front of her farm. She is also installing an educational pollinator garden with labeled plants. And several years ago, she converted a patch of her property into prairie using a free seed mix from the Bee & Butterfly Habitat Fund; anyone willing to convert at least two acres is eligible to apply for the free seeds at BeeAndButterflyFund.org.

Stine emphasized that in addition to private actions like these, it's also important to speak up publicly for pollinators. For instance, she said, federal agencies don't always prioritize bees and other insects when deciding how chemicals should be regulated.

"The system is not set up for the benefit of the environment," Stine said. "It's set up for the benefit of chemical companies. We need to let our elected officials know that we're paying attention now."

Wisconsin's Pollinator Protection Plan, which details the strategies Stine outlined in her talk, is available on the DATCP website, datcp.wi.gov.

--Winifred Bird is a freelance writer and translator. You can contact her at info@winifredbird.com.



Sue Dompke shows off a new pollinator garden at Sweet Mountain Farm, where she raises bees.

PHOTOS BY WINIFRED BIRD

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