

What I have learned from Pollinators!

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National Pollinator Month occurs in June, but pollinators are out and about the entire season which gives us reason to celebrate all summer long. After all, pollinators are important for survival and without pollinators, there would be no plants to display and our food source would decrease. You can say that I have jumped on the pollinator bandwagon and have now created plenty of pit stops throughout the gardens.

We have grown tremendously and now have plenty of food throughout the garden including lots of native, non-invasive/exotic and nectar/pollen producing plants. While touring school groups, we teach them to say thank you to our many, many pollinators. This helps those who are generally afraid of bugs. And, what is a pollinator? Anything that moves pollen...wind, bugs, animals and sometimes people. Unfortunately, not all pollinators are cute and fuzzy and while some are downright scary and destructive, the role they play far outweighs their habits.

Going back to something I said above, native, non-invasive/exotics and nectar/pollen producing displays of plants. Of course, native plants are a must. Believe it or not, we have a lot of native plants in our gardens. They consist of coneflowers, several species of milk or butterfly weed, lilies, phlox, hardy cacti and more. Someone once commented that we need to replace our weeds in the Perennial Border. It is unfortunate that this person categorizes native plants as weeds. Anyway, some of us may have heard the term Nativar. This is a selection made from a native plant. A good example are the coneflowers. Our native coneflower is pink with a bright purple cone. Over the years, white, orange, red and yellow coneflowers have hit the market. While they appeal to the consumer, I have noticed how much they attract the pollinators too. To my knowledge there is no concrete proof that the pollen is any different. I can see a fuss over the double flowering coneflowers because they kind-of lack a cone...no pollen. Therefore, they would be just aesthetics. We grow several species of milkweed, but I find more monarch activity on *Gomphocarpus physocarpus*, balloon milkweed which is native to southern Africa. I think a little diversity is OK, don't you?



PowWow® White coneflower

PowWow® Wild Berry coneflower
'Cheyenne Spirit'



Far Left:
Gomphocarpus physocarpus
-balloon
milkweed

Top: *Asclepias tuberosa* -yellow
butterfly weed

Middle:
Asclepias syriaca
-common
milkweed

Bottom:
Asclepias tuberosa -orange
butterfly weed

Non-invasive/exotics can be a scary term. While some think all non-natives should fall in this category, I have learned to let the experts decide what is invasive before I introduce something to our plant collections. If anything, there have been a lot of native plants that have taken over. *Asclepias syriaca*, common milkweed popped up for us, we did not plant it originally. It popped up in our Tropical Garden in 2012 and has run through the wall into the Perennial Border, seeded into the Xeric Scree and along the fence line. It was my intent to leave it to the Tropical Garden only, but my guilt takes over if I remove it from the other spaces. Non-native plants can too fall into the category of essential, easy to grow and needed in the garden. Part of our mission is to “connect people to the world of plants”, something Paul Ciener said himself. It is my job to display a healthy eco system as well as keeping up with the mission. I think I can do both. A big group of non-native plants that attract pollinators would reside in our herb garden. Herbs are a favorite among pollinators, but most herbs are native to the Mediterranean region.



Honeybee on crepe myrtle Top: Monarch on butterfly bush Honeybee on St. John's Wort
Bottom: Honeybee on Himalayan creeper



Upper Left:
Bumblebees in
the squash flower

Lower Left:
swallowtail
caterpillar on
parsley

Right: bumblebee
in lavender

Lastly, let's look at plants that produce an abundance of nectar and pollen. Pollinators are hungry and while the monarch will lay her eggs on the milkweed, as an adult, she still needs to eat and sip. Milkweed does not present pollen like other flowers but produces a large amount of nectar. While monarchs may not need pollen, the honeybees do. They will gather pollen from all sources which is why we sow a lot of annual seeds. A big source of pollen comes from zinnias, cosmos and sunflowers. Another reason for annuals is to create a bridge of flowers during off peak seasons. There is somewhat of a flower gap between say tulip or peony season (April - early May), lily or salvia season (June) and lastly perennial sunflower or chrysanthemum season (September). In most years, annuals can be sown directly into the ground on May 1st.



Annuals: Zinnia, Cosmos, Sunflowers, Mexican Sunflowers

Our Essential Pollinator areas include all Seasonal Beds...the Annual Border, Hourglass Garden and Pattern Garden, and the Tropical Garden, Future Discovery Garden Vignette, the Parking Lot medians, and the Kitchen & Cutting Gardens. It is clear how important our 7 acre haven has become. I would rather see a diversity of plants, native, non-native and lots of flowers over a drug induced lawn and empty lots. I have learned to pick my battles and flowers need to win!