



## Blossoming Biodiversity: Pollinators Thriving in Native Plant Gardens

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Leaf-cutter bee (*Megachile* spp.) on meadow blazing star (*Liatris ligulistylis*). Photo by Shirley Bartz

When we think of a typical ornamental flower garden, we tend to think of a visually pleasing space that we create for beauty and outdoor activity. Often, we work to protect these spaces from weeds and pests. A native wildflower garden can satisfy the same needs, but it also supports native bird and insect pollinators in desperate need of food.

By planting native flowers and grasses, we can increase biodiversity and provide a banquet of necessary food to native pollinators. This is one instance when feeding the wildlife is highly encouraged!

Prairie plants and insects have evolved together over thousands of years. By planting a garden of native plant species, you will draw in a community of insects and birds that you might not otherwise see. These plants and animals are adapted to live with each other, so insects feeding in your garden will not cause irreparable harm to the plants.

Native pollinators are part of a complex food web and provide their free services of pollinating blooms that will create fruit and seeds in native and cultivated crops. In the height of the growing season, when blooms are attracting a diversity of pollinators, yellow warblers, chipping sparrows and other invertivores (i.e., those feeding on insects), will collect some of these insects to feed their young.

The pollinated flowers will later produce an abundance of seeds which will, in turn, draw in migrating songbirds. You could see an American goldfinch picking tiny seeds from a Lindley's aster, or an orange-crowned warbler foraging for late season insects as they migrate south in the fall.

There are other notable differences between a flower garden planted with

ornamentals (like chrysanthemums, petunias and geraniums), and one planted with native plant species (such as dotted blazing-star, many-flowered aster, and wild bergamot). The ornamentals are often annuals, living for only one season. As a result, you have to buy them each year along with garden soil and fertilizer, in some cases.

Many native species are perennial, which means you plant them in the ground once, and they live and flower for years, holding the soil in place with their deep roots and fertilizing it as they drop their leaves. Ornamentals may also require regular watering throughout the season, whereas native perennials need water to establish as seedlings, but after one or two growing seasons, the plants are drought-tolerant and often make do with minimal seasonal rainfall.

One benefit of a native wildflower garden is the variety and abundance of pollinators that will be drawn to your yard. Although the native bees, beetles, flies and butterflies will be targeting specific species of favoured flowers or host plants for their young, other plants in your yard will benefit from their pollination services as well.

For example, in one particular native garden, there may be 21 species of wildflowers and three species of grass in a four by seven-metre area. Among the flowering grasses and forbs, there could also be at least five species of native bees and bumble bees, four different kinds of beetles, seven types of butterflies, white and yellow crab spiders, and numerous types of unique flies that mimic bees.

Watching the pollinators arrive in your garden can be a little like birdwatching, except with these creatures, you can

lean in close and observe them from just inches away, where you can see details like the stained-glass panes of their wings and the rainbow facets of their eyes.

They can be easily photographed, posted on social media and used as a shared-learning opportunity for children and grandparents, and all ages in between. When these busy bugs are working, it is easy for kids and adults alike to understand their industry and their beauty.

Understanding the work they do for us, turning flowers into fruits and vegetables, is an important part of teaching our children to have a good relationship with the creatures that live with us in Saskatchewan.

With the loss of more than 80 per cent of the native grasslands in our province, the unbroken prairie is an endangered ecosystem. When you plant a native wildflower garden, you are helping to conserve a disappearing community of plants and animals. With their drought tolerance, long lifespan and community of colourful entertaining pollinators, a native garden is an economical and delightful addition to any yard.

We are not only creating habitat for pollinators, we are also increasing connectivity between remnant patches of native grasslands in our prairie landscape. Prairie species at risk are mainly threatened by habitat loss; so, planting a native garden is also a way of reducing that threat—and, it is a small step toward changing the way we think about sharing our place in the grasslands, with the plants and animals that have lived here for thousands of years. 🐝