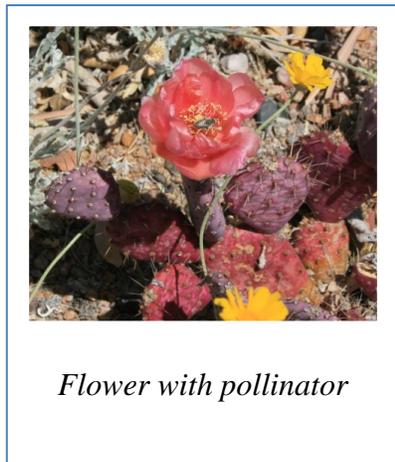


Flowers and pollinators

We distinguish between flower gardens and vegetable ones. This is, of course, an unnecessary differentiation, since so many flowers are edible and so many vegetables are lovely. Flowers are often the indicator that our vegetables are on the way: many of the yellow tomato flowers will become pollinated and produce fruits, likewise the hibiscus-like flowers of okra. Even those who do not like eating that vegetable admire its cream colored blossoms. Not all plants bloom, but a significant number of garden plants do. Why would plants create a floral display? It takes a large amount of resources to produce a blossom, so there must be a significant benefit. The reason may not be because they want to please us, although Michael Pollan in *The Botany of Desire* states that plants have evolved in a way that encourages humans to propagate them.



Not all flowers are lovely – while it may not be attractive, even Bermuda grass produces a flower. Beautiful or plain, however, flowers play a unique role in a plant’s life. Whether or not we eat a plant’s leaves, flowers or fruit, if it produces a blossom, it is doing it for a reason – propagation.



It attracts pollinators, either by its color, scent, or shape, alone or in any combination and catches pollen. The shape makes it easier for some pollen to be transported on the wind, as in Bermuda grass.

Many of our favorite fruiting vegetables result from the efforts of pollinators such as bees. Bees seek out white, yellow or blue flowers with a fresh, mild, pleasant odor. They prefer a shallow bowl shape, providing them a landing platform, but will also fly to tubular flowers.

We usually talk about honeybees as if they were the only important pollinators and many of our food crops grown in large agricultural settings do rely on them. Other creatures,

however, also play a role in plant reproduction. The result might not be for our consumption, but that is not the plant’s concern.

Different pollinators are attracted to different types of flowers. Night-blooming flowers tend to be duller colors - white, green or purple – but they often have a strong scent, which attracts night flyers like bats and moths.

Bright colorful flowers tend to attract brightly colored pollinators. It is a fact that hummingbirds are drawn to tubular red flowers but their taste is somewhat more expansive than that. In the absence of their favorites, they seek out other blooms that may have nectar (their sugar source) and minute insects (yes, they are busy insect-eaters), but scent is not important. Butterflies will seek out brightly colored flowers in reds and purples with a slight scent. They prefer an inflorescence that provides a landing pad, hence lantana is a favorite.

When trying to attract butterflies, remember that the juveniles might not look like adults. What people sometimes forget is that butterflies start off as leaf-eating caterpillars, which may not eat the same food as adults, which may eat nectar. Be prepared to sacrifice some leaves early, to see a beautiful butterfly later.

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