



Pollinators

Desert gardeners know that one can grow virtually anything in this climate. In fact, it is possible to produce any plant in any climate, as long as a person is prepared to expend herculean efforts, and frequently large amounts of time and money. This is obviously not a good use of either natural or personal resources. Transplanted northerners occasionally wax nostalgic for unsuitable things such as maple trees and lilac bushes, which probably would be miserable under our local conditions. Instead of bemoaning the lack of growing things that are familiar, why not select from the impressive array of beautiful plants that thrive in the desert?

One of the most important facts we need to recognize is that our home gardens are part of the wider environment. When we grow native even desert adapted plants, we are encouraging more than a few flowers; we are also promoting pollinators.

Pollinators, and the decline in their populations, are finally becoming topics of conversation. Whether their demise is due to habitat loss, global climate change, pesticides, or a combination of these factors, it is not something we can ignore. A third of our food is possible because of insect pollinators. The decline in honeybees has been in the news, and for good reason. Honeybees are essential to the production of an impressive portion of our food supply. They are not the only creatures that pollinate plants, however, and these others are at risk as well.

There are hundreds of bee species in Southern Nevada. Leafcutter bees, which are often native, can make leaves scalloped as they take round pieces to line their nests. Bumble bees, whether American golden northern, tri-colored, and yellow faced fly around here. We have carpenter bees, often called “black bumblebees”, but this is inaccurate. Carpenters fly faster than bumblebees, and their flight is less smooth, almost reminiscent of a hummingbird. By the way, when a carpenter bee seems to be buzzing around you or banging into windows, it is searching for a mate. They are not interested in people.

Nocturnal pollinators such as bats and moths are important for plants that flower at night. These include some tropical plants, but also agave, dates, figs, even peaches. Yuccas require the yucca moth for reproduction.



Butterflies are not important for our food but many flowers benefit from their presence. Attracting butterflies is not usually difficult task if the plants have large pink or red flowers, multiple small flowers that form platforms (like lantana), or flat flowers where they can land.

Monarchs are possibly the most familiar of North American butterflies. The adults are particularly fond of flower nectar, and will visit places where flowering plants are growing. Many of us know think of milkweed when we think of them, because their offspring only eat milkweed leaves. Lately, people have expressed interest in planting milkweed to encourage Monarch butterflies. This is wonderful, but it is important to remember that the leaves will definitely look ratty. It is worth it. The larvae are an essential stage for the development of butterflies.

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