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Bee Conscious

OTHER THAN NOTICING BEES DURING PICNICS, WE MAY not pay these tiny winged creatures much mind. But scientists and beekeepers do. They are keenly aware of the critical role that bees (and other pollinators) play in helping flowering plants reproduce. In fact, about a third of our diet comes from the pollinating activity of bees. That includes the choicest fruits and vegetables, and even chocolate. Not to mention other products, such as cotton, beverages and medicine.

"[Harvard naturalist] Edward O. Wilson has stated that without pollinators, humans would only live a few months," says Stephen Buchmann, author of *The Bee Tree* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2007) and *Letters From the Hive* (Bantam, 2005). "Albert Einstein gave us four years without pollinators."

Thought of this way, bees are far more than honey makers. That's why researchers grew concerned last fall when beekeepers started reporting that many of their hives had been deserted. The phenomenon, known as colony collapse disorder (CCD), has spread to as many as 35 states (as of May), with similar declines reported in Canada, Brazil and Europe.

So, what's happening to our bees? No one knows for sure, but many researchers suspect a biological pathogen. Still, pesticides aren't off the hook. "Pesticides are generally lethal to bees and other pollinators," says Buchmann, who is also the international coordinator for the North American Pollinator Protection Campaign and adjunct professor of entomology at the University of Arizona, Tucson. "Even more insidious are systemic insecticides that are taken up in floral nectar," he says. "When ingested, these kill bees directly, or become concentrated in honey."

While science is studying genetics to help bees gain ground, there are a few things we can do, too. Buchmann offers these backyard basics:

- » Reduce the use of pesticides and herbicides.
- » Plant clumps of six or more (not single) plants that bees like.
- » Plant flowers with a profusion of blooms from spring into fall.
- » Use native plants, which have more nectar and pollen than hybrids.

To raise awareness, the U.S. Senate has designated June 24 to 30 as National Pollinator Week, and the Postal Service is releasing a commemorative series of stamps. For a peek, see the bee stamp on Page 8. For more information about bees, their health products and CCD, check out Page 30. (You can also visit www.pollinator.org.)

This month, let's share the buzz on bees, and let's live.



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