

Out in the Garden

Rockport Garden Club, August 2020



Garden Diary: Pollinators

We have been hearing a great deal about the plight of pollinators. They are in serious trouble. Without bees and other pollinators such as butterflies, moths and even bats, we can not produce food. As conscientious gardeners we want to make a difference. Fortunately, we have an opportunity to create welcoming habitats by providing the same things all living creatures need to thrive.

Bees: Responsible for pollinating 87% of all plants and 90% of all flowering plants, bees are essential to life on Earth. Their massive contribution to pollination so over-shadows other insects that some naturalists ignore butterflies and anything else that is not a bee. It's a lively ongoing discussion.

Native foraging bees are passive. Usually they're so focused on gathering pollen from a flower, you can stroke them. Out of the 4,000 species of native bees, only bumblebees have what we might call hives. The rest of the species are solitary and never aggressively defend a home space. Most native bees nest in the ground, in wood or in stems.



Food: Pollinators feed on nectar. A diverse selection of flowers of varying shape, size, bloom time, color and height will equal greater diversity and well-being of pollinators. Always use organically grown plants or seeds as chemical applications are harmful to pollinators.

The best thing we can do for native bees is to grow nectar-producing plants (see below.) The #1 nectar-

producing plant is Clover so don't worry about it in your lawn.

Water: Shallow pools of water with floating elements for pollinators to land on (a twig will do) are perfect. Some pollinators drink muddy water which provides minerals. It is also the building material for bee nests.

Shelter: If possible leave an undisturbed slightly wild section of native flowers and grasses (planted in clumps not rows) in your garden. This will provide a safe harbor for pollinators to lay eggs, grow larvae and over winter. Many pollinators dwell under ground so turn over flowerpots with drainage holes upside down and leave piles of twigs or brush laying about to encourage these pollinators to thrive in your garden. Preferably this should be near or under one of your planted spaces to reap the benefit of that habitat.



It sounds simple enough but it can be confusing reading all the tags on nursery plants. It is trendy to say a plant attracts pollinators but not all plants are equal. Red/Orange Zinnias, cosmos, echinacea, bee balm, phlox, anise hyssop, butterfly weed, borage, dill and fennel are all good plants to begin a pollinator garden.

Your garden will be healthier and the overall ecosystem will improve.

Here's a list of plants to consider: [Pollinator-Friendly Plants for the Northeast United States](#)

Books: Check out Doug Tallamy's books available in the Boston Public Library's E-book collection.

And don't forget Dan Jaffe Wilder's list of great plants for healthy habitats: [Top 10 Plants](#)

—Submitted by Patty Hock & Lisa Simms

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The Garden Cart:

Carex

Sedges look similar to grasses but reside in the *Cyperaceae* family and are not true grasses. Most of the plants we commonly call sedges are in the genus *Carex*. The common name lends rhyme to the saying “sedges have edges, and rushes are round, but grasses have nodes from their tips to the ground.” The “edges” refer to their stems, which are triangular in cross section. Distinctive inflorescences, fused sheaths and inconspicuous nodes set them apart from true grasses or rushes.

Sedges bloom in spring and provide an early meal for birds, caterpillars and small mammals before most native grasses begin to bloom. The foliage serves as a cover and nesting sites for birds. Wood ducks nest in trees above sedges using the leaves to soften the fall of fledging ducks during flying lessons.

Most sedges resent being cut back so if the foliage lasts through the year untattered, just leave it alone. If the older foliage looks messy, or the tips have been burned by winter cold, trim the sedge back by no more than a third, in March or April.

Sedges can be more challenging to grow than grasses because they are more sensitive to soil moisture, salt concentrations and temperature fluctuations. They are slower growing than grasses. A quick rule of thumb is that sedges from Asia are for shade and sedges from New Zealand can take more sun. In the nurseries, you will find cultivars with the trademarked name of Evercolor which are good for containers, ground covers, specimens or borders.

However, the focus of this column is native sedges which are being used for erosion control, bio-swales and lawn alternatives. The Native Plant Trust which oversees the Garden in the Woods in Framingham lists six sedges native to New England for sale; three of which grow successfully in my garden. All are resistant to deer and rabbits and provide a contrast to flowering plants.

Carex pensylvanica or Pennsylvania sedge supports dozens of butterfly and moth species.. It is 6 to 10 inches high and spreads gradually to form a dense 12 to 18 inch dense mat. It doesn't need irrigation nor mowing so it is a good lawn alternative for dry shade or moist sun.



Carex Appalachia or Appalachian sedge is delicate and forms tight clumps of fine dainty leaves which look charming blowing in the breeze. It tops out at 8 to 10 inches with a spread of 10 to 14 inches. Once established, It is adaptable to most garden situations but thrives in moist sun or partial shade.



Carex platyphylla or silver sedge brings blue or blue-silver color to the shade garden. It reaches a height of 8 to 12 inches with a spread of 12 to 18 inches. It prefers average moisture but can survive a drought year. This sedge prefers a clipping in early spring to stimulate new colored growth.



—Submitted by Patty Hock

