Recommending plants to benefit and attract pollinators

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A survey was conducted by the University of Nebraska to unveil the extent to which horticultural employees are knowledgeable about pollinators. Carter Westerhold, Samuel Wortman, Kim Todd, and Douglas Golick sought to determine what plant and management recommendations these employees were passing along to customers regarding pollinator conservation and to assess what other advice could be added to their repertoire of recommendations to augment their general benefit.

Their findings were published in the article "Knowledge of Pollinator Conservation and Associated Plant Recommendations in the Horticultural Retail Industry" in *HortTechnology*.

As detailed in the article, pollinating insects are integral to the health of all terrestrial ecosystems and agriculture worldwide. Urbanization can greatly reduce nutritional resources and habitat for pollinators. However, these losses can be mitigated through targeted landscape practices, such as planting nectar- and pollen-rich plants and managing pollinator habitats in urban areas, especially in home landscapes.

As homeowners attempt to conserve pollinators through horticulture practices, they often seek the advice and guidance of horticulture retail employees regarding what plants they can successfully include on their properties to maximize their intended benefit to pollinators as well as to their home ecosystems.

The researchers discovered at the outset that overall employee knowledge was adequate. However, among uncertified and part-time employees, knowledge and awareness was significantly lower, especially related to the breadth of possible plant selection. Due to that evident information gap, the researchers identified several opportunities for educational outreach aimed at improving both employee and customer understanding on this important subject.

Results and determinations of this survey were extrapolated and generalized from its 224 respondents used as a cross-section of horticulture employees nationally. Initial advice from these employees lacked uniformity, although the glaring variables there were often due to an understanding of the needs of localized ecosystems and were based on personal observations from each individual.

However, accurate knowledge of beneficial plants for pollinators proved to be the weakest topic for horticulture employees, signaling a need for specialized education and training to strengthen a verifiable transference of information.

The researchers also determined that more-detailed labeling of pollinator food plants would benefit this endeavor, as customers may purchase more pollinator-friendly plants when correctly labeled as "pollinator friendly". Also, they surmise that businesses could distribute information to customers on pollinator conservation in the form of pamphlets or booklets that focused on plant selection and landscape management.

Public interest in pollinator conservation has increased markedly in the past decade. The number of homeowners seeking pollinator conservation advice from horticulture retail businesses should rise as well. Knowledgeability of horticulture retail staff in plant selection is an important quality for a garden center to have. The results of this survey might help to determine how to better ensure that accurate information

is being passed on to customers.

Westerhold adds "The home landscape could be an invaluable asset to pollinator conservation efforts. Our study highlights opportunities for extension and industry to ensure home pollinator conservation efforts are successful by equipping retailers with scientifically accurate information for homeowners."

More information: Carter M. Westerhold et al, Knowledge of Pollinator Conservation and Associated Plant Recommendations in the Horticultural Retail Industry, *HortTechnology* (2018). DOI: 10.21273/HORTTECH03973-18

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