

Save the bees (and time and money) by creating a bee lawn

28 May 2019, by Dean Fosdick



This May 2, 2019 photo shows a pollen-laden Italian honeybee in a bee lawn near Langley, Wash. Bee lawns are turf grasses blended with low-growing perennials that bloom again after mowing. This is a spontaneous ground cover that is a great pollen source for beneficial insects. Dandelions may be considered weeds by fastidious lawn managers but they bloom early in spring when little else is flowering and are favored by foraging pollinators. (Dean Fosdick via AP)

Flowering "bee lawns" that attract pollinators are a compromise between fastidious turf management and the more casual yard approach. They add biodiversity to the landscape and need less maintenance. That makes them cost-effective, too.

Bee lawns are turf grasses blended with low-growing perennials that bloom again after mowing. They're cared for like typical lawns, making them comfortable for playing and lounging. But they also contain protein-rich ingredients providing vital nutrients for foraging pollinators.

Their natural diversity—they might contain fine fescues mixed with such spontaneous plants as

white clover, dandelions (that bloom early when little else is flowering), creeping thyme, daisies and shade-tolerant lamium—make them less demanding and more resilient than Kentucky bluegrass. Bee lawns require minimal watering and little fertilizing, encourage deeper roots and build healthier soil—especially when their clippings are returned to the turf.

James Wolfin, a graduate research assistant working on the University of Minnesota's [bee lawn](#) project, suggests using the fescue *Festuca brevipila*.

"This grass has a thin leaf blade and a slow rate of growth," Wolfin said. "The slow rate of growth is essential in making sure the grass blades do not create a canopy over the flowers."

Hand weeding is recommended.

For people who feel they don't have the time, money or talent for gardening, bee lawns mean "we can mow our lawns less frequently, let the lawn flowers grow and provide habitat for bees," said Susannah Lerman, a research ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station in Amherst, Massachusetts. "Everyone can contribute to this simple solution for advancing bee conservation."

Bee populations have been crashing for the past couple of decades because of habitat loss, chemical use and parasitic mites. These collapses are particularly worrisome since pollinators are instrumental in the growth of more than a third of the food making it to our tables.



"The two-week mowing regime supported the highest abundance of bees," Lerman said, citing data from a recent turf study in Springfield, Massachusetts.

"We documented 111 species of bee (mostly [native species](#) and the majority wild bees) using the lawn flowers in western Massachusetts suburban yards," she said.

Bee lawns are compatible with family activities unless you run into aggressive colonies of ground-dwelling yellow jackets. Honeybees, wild bees and bumblebees usually are docile unless provoked.

This May 12, 2019 photo shows a white clover in a bee lawn near Langley, Wash. Bee lawns are turf grasses blended with low-growing perennials that bloom again after mowing. This is a spontaneous ground cover that is a great pollen source for beneficial insects. (Dean Fosdick via AP)

More information: For more about managing lawns for pollinators, see this fact sheet from the University of Minnesota Extension's Bee Lab:

www.beelab.umn.edu/sites/beela...ee-lawns-2018-mg.pdf

Every pollinator plant helps rebuild those insect stocks, even if it's just part of a colorful arrangement on a corner of the property.

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Sunny slopes, rocky ground, boulevards, athletic fields and golf courses are optimal locations. "Also, office parks could benefit from bee lawns, particularly since they have very low human traffic," Lerman said.

Check, though, with your neighbors and city hall before doing any lawn-alternative landscaping.

"It shouldn't be too much of a hassle to get your community on board with bee lawns," Wolfin said. "In terms of dealing with neighbors, sometimes it can be useful to install a row or strip of rocks or [wood chips](#) along your fence line to hinder the ability of flowers to spread to your neighbor's lawn."

Signage also helps, he said.

Monitor growth regularly to ensure you're not introducing invasive weeds or creating a tall, unsightly yard. Mowing to about 3 inches is a good rule to follow.

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