

# Plant a pollinator garden to supply food sources after freeze

7 April 2021, by Laura Muntean



Pollinators are beginning to visit The Gardens at Texas A&M University. Credit: Texas A&M AgriLife photo by Laura McKenzie

Pollinators serve a great purpose in helping pollinate plants and vegetables alike during many months of the year. Although wildflowers returned post-freeze, and many plants are beginning to show life again, most flowering was set back several weeks meaning food sources for pollinators are not available. Planting a few already-flowering plants or fast-growing seeds in your pollinator garden will help them get through while other plants recover.

Michael Arnold, Ph.D., director of The Gardens at Texas A&M University and professor of landscape horticulture for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, walks us through what we can do immediately to help pollinators and what steps we can take to set them up for long-term success and year-round support.

Pollinators include butterflies and bees, but also birds, bats, moths and small animals who obtain nectar and pollen from flowers, trees and [woody shrubs](#).

## Pollinator-friendly plants that will immediately help the pollinators

Arnold suggested gardeners plant already-flowering annuals or very fast-growing perennials that tend to bloom in the first year to provide immediate relief for pollinators. This will help them get through the [early spring](#) as plants recover from the freeze.

"Sweet alyssum and pot marigolds will do well for this cooler weather and grow into most of the spring," he said. "Borage, if you like herbs, is fantastic for bees."

A few other plants to consider are catnip, a great choice for bees and not just for cats, and traditional spring plants like larkspur and Mexican hat, which can be a perennial but also may bloom fairly quickly from seed.

"It is the year of the sunflower, and they are a good one to keep in mind because they are very fast growing, and they bloom early," Arnold said. "So, you could make an impact in just a few weeks in the garden with them."

If you are looking for something dual purpose, basil is a great herb to consider. Any bee balms can be a good option and are sold as perennials or in wildflower mixes. Salvias and sages will also crossover and pick up some of the butterfly and lepidoptera pollinators. Greg's blue mist will most likely bloom this spring but will also return even better in years to come.

"Lepidoptera are often attracted to composite flowers like those in the aster family," he said, "But you could also add some really quick-growing plants like cosmos and the calendula that would be available early in the season for them."

Plants for an immediate pollinator garden:

- Aster

- Basil
- Bee balm
- Borage
- Bush morning glory
- Catnip
- Cosmos
- Flame acanthus
- Greg's blue mist
- Larkspur
- Mexican hat
- Pot marigold
- Sage
- Salvia
- Sunflowers
- Sweet alyssum
- Zinnias

### **Pollinator-friendly plants to help pollinators year round**

Arnold said this pollinator rescue following Winter Storm Uri could be a good starting point for homeowners to think about providing garden spaces that support pollinators during all of the months for years to come.

The key to a great long-term pollinator garden is having plants that will provide a food source year-round. So, taking the time to plan out the periods of bloom per plant to make sure you have each month covered will insure you have your pollinators well cared for, Arnold explained.

"I may even make a spreadsheet and make my columns with the month of year and annotate these plants according to when they bloom to ensure I have things covering all the months needed for adequate pollinator support," he said.

As you begin construction of your long-term pollinator garden, begin with the backbone of plants—woody plants.

Red maples are a great bee pollinator for early spring and late winter, and some yucca relatives are pollinator attractants as well. Yuccas planted now would provide food in coming years, and represent hardier, long-term additions to any pollinator garden.

"These will have some off-time blooms like the red maple to provide that early start. Or I may provide something like the flame acanthus, native honeysuckle vines, crossvines or trumpet creepers," he said. "Things like the coral vine and Mexican flame vine will provide longer seasons. Pick the woody materials that will provide food in the times of sparseness or a long season of bloom."

Coral vine is a woody tropical vine often used as either an herbaceous perennial in Texas or annual further north and will mature a bit later into summer. They typically grow on a garden fence, a porch side or large trellis.

Other shrubs to consider would be kidney wood, bee bush and almond verbena, which will bloom for about six months out of the year. Another good shrub option, glossy abelia, produces high volumes of trumpet-shaped flowers and blooms over a large portion of the growing season.

If roses are something you wish to have, you can use those too, but the old-fashioned single roses will provide the most use due to flower structure for the pollinators themselves. For a mid- to late-season bloom, butterfly bush would be a good option.

Plants for lasting pollinator gardens:

- Almond verbena
- Bush morning glory
- Butterfly bush
- Coral vine
- Cross vine
- Glossy abelia
- Honey Suckle
- Kidney wood
- Mexican flame vine
- Old-fashioned single roses
- Red maple
- Trumpet creeper
- Yucca

### **Add plant diversity to your pollinator garden**

Arnold suggests keeping pollinators in mind when choosing flowers and not picking varieties that are

only appealing to the eye. Flower structure plays a large part in what benefits a pollinator.

Zinnias are a good example. While most people gravitate toward the double-flowering zinnia filled with showy ray flowers, pollinators prefer the old-fashioned single or semi-double zinnias with a prominent ray of disk flowers in the center, because those often have more pollen and nectar associated with them.

Having an assortment of composite flowers, flowers with both ray and disk petals, like sunflowers have the dark center disk petals with yellow ray petals surrounding it, as well as trumpet shaped flowers provides some versatility and becomes more appealing to a wider audience of insects as well as hummingbirds.

The flame acanthus provides a tubular, or trumpet-shaped flower, that is enticing to both butterflies and hummingbirds. It is a bit of a woody shrub and will usually bloom within the first year. The bush morning glory also provides good tubular shaped flowers and may return in mild winters.

"And once flame acanthus begins to bloom in the spring, it will pretty much bloom through the whole summer for you," he said. "It doesn't have a massive number of blooms, but it has a steady production of blooms, which is important for our pollinators."

Many flowering vegetables need pollination and also provide food for pollinators. Growing things like peppers or strawberries that appeal to the pollinators is great.

"Don't pull up all of your cabbage and kale because once it bolts and flowers, many of those flowers will be attractive to a variety of pollinators," he said.

So, if you have already planted a few things that may be coming to an end, don't pull them up as they look finished or have bolted. Leave them to offer another source of food as they go to flower.

### **Create a safe space for all type of pollinators**

Arnold said long-term pollinator gardens should

provide food for all pollinator life cycles and also sheltering plants and structures.

"So, as we think about pollinators, we have to think about food for them in their adult phases, but also in the larval stages if they have them," he said. "So, it isn't just about the [flowers](#) as adults but also the host plants to feed the developing larvae as well. Milkweeds and passion vines are good examples of larval host plants for butterflies."

Consider placing a water source. Many insects get moisture from the [plants](#) they consume, but some will access supplemental water sources. Also, leave a bit of open ground, as some are ground-dwelling.

"If we have some open spots of soil that they can use to make nests, those are good things to think about," he said. "So, we bring all of those concepts together."

There are even plans available for pollinator hotels, from extremely extensive hotels to build or something as small as a mailbox. These will include things like wood that can be bored into, or sections of bamboo where pollinators may crawl in and build cocoons or have their young.

Remember, keep diverse areas, some bare-mulched areas and maybe even leave the back of the garden with just some bare spots on the ground where [pollinators](#) may end up making their home.

Provided by Texas A&M University

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