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# Ask a Master Gardener

*Timely insights on relevant topics from our area's home gardening experts*



## Attracting Pollinators to the Home Garden

*Making the right plant selections will help draw pollinators to the home garden*

By Kari Ranten

Pollinators are the heroes in our landscape and food chain. The small but mighty bees, hummingbirds, butterflies, and other birds and beneficial insects are key to crop production and creating a diverse environment. The home gardener often sets out to create a pollinator-friendly landscape and quickly discovers how enjoyable it is to watch these pollinators in the garden.

***Proper plant selection and placement is key to luring vital pollinators to the home garden.***

Scientific research emphasizes the importance of pollinators, crediting them with the reproduction of 90 percent of flowering plants and one-third of human food crops. “Each of us depends on these industrious pollinators in a practical way to provide us with the wide range of foods we eat. In addition, pollinators are part of the intricate web that supports the biological diversity in natural ecosystems that helps sustain our quality of life,” say the authors of *Selecting Plants for Pollinators*.

*“Without bees, there would be no apples, pumpkins, strawberries or many other fruits and vegetables . . . Approximately one in three mouthfuls of food and drink require the presence of a pollinator.” – Xerces Society*

Research shows that pollinator populations, including bees and butterflies, are declining in Washington state and the United States. “Unfortunately, the numbers of both native pollinators and domesticated bee populations are declining. They are threatened by habitat loss, disease, and the excessive and inappropriate use of pesticides.”<sup>2</sup> In March of 2025 Washington State University staff published a study showing that butterfly numbers have decreased by more than 20 percent from 2000 to 2020, with some species declining by more than 90 percent.<sup>7</sup>

Selecting the right plants is foundational to drawing pollinators to your garden. The two Pollinator Gardens in the Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener Discovery Garden, west of Mount Vernon, provide examples of plants that attract pollinators throughout the seasons. Master Gardener Alix Foster oversees the Pollinator Gardens and several years ago wrote an article describing the basics about the pollination process and why pollinators are so important, along with what each gardener can do to support pollinators.



**Left:** *Spiraea japonica* Golden Princess attracts pollinators in the Pollinator Garden in the Discovery Garden. **Right:** Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*) and foxglove attract various pollinators, especially bees. Other pollinators like butterflies, moths, and flies are also attracted to the flowers. Photos © Skagit County Master Gardeners.

Foster recently led a tour of one of the compact Pollinator Gardens to showcase the selection and placement of plants that maximize the number and variety of bugs and birds visiting the garden. Efforts are underway to add more native plants and enhance the number of plants that bloom in sequence over the months along with a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes to span the seasons. During daytime hours, 365 days a year, enjoy a self-guided tour of the Discovery Garden where signs list the plant names, what pollinators they draw, and the bloom time for the specimens on display. To see the complete list of plants in the Pollinator Gardens at the Discovery Garden, go to <https://skagitmg.org/home/discovery-garden/pollinator-garden/>.

Fortunately, there is an abundance of options for pollinator-friendly plants. The Pollinator Partnership, a global non-profit dedicated to the protection and promotion of pollinators and their ecosystems, offers a tool on their website to generate a list based on zip code

at <https://www.pollinator.org/find-your-roots-tool>. A search using Mount Vernon, WA 98273, yields a list of 1,172 perennial flowers, shrubs, and trees to consider for a pollinator landscape.

### Several fundamentals apply when choosing plants to draw pollinators:

**Use native plants:** Natives, including wildflowers, shrubs, and trees, are naturally adapted to the region's climate and soil. Research by Gordon Frankie<sup>3</sup> shows native plants are four times more likely than non-native plants to attract bees and significantly increase the abundance of butterflies and moths. The Salal Native Plant Garden, adjacent to the Discovery Garden, introduces home gardeners to many varieties native to northwest Washington. According to the Pollinator Partnership, "Non-native plants such as cultivar and hybrid plant species are, in most cases, not good for pollinators as they can result in double flowers, changes in flower color, and sterile flowers with no pollen."

**Select plants that bloom across the seasons:** Flowering plants, including annuals and perennials, serve as a draw for pollinators. When shopping for plants, nursery tags often list the pollinators that are attracted to the specific plant. As an example, a tag on *Monarda fistulosa*, a perennial commonly called bee balm, lists that the deep pink blooms attract bees, hummingbirds, and butterflies.

**Pollinators love flowers – keep blooms going throughout the seasons:** Pollinators are drawn by a variety of plant qualities, colorful blooms, and the availability of pollen and/or nectar.

In the search for food resources, each type of pollinator has preferences for the color, nectar, odor, pollen, and flower shape. The Pollinator Partnership has compiled the Pollinator



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**Application period is now open through August 15, 2025.**

WSU has recently launched a new training platform called Washington Green School, designed to provide comprehensive research-based horticulture and environmental stewardship education. The Washington Green School offers two distinct tracks:

- **Washington Gardener Certificate Track**  
This option is ideal for individuals seeking to enhance their gardening skills without the commitment of volunteering. This self-paced, online-only course provides a certificate upon successful completion.
- **Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Track**  
This track is for those interested in becoming certified WSU Extension Master Gardener volunteers and includes the Green School online coursework, in-person, local volunteer training, and a commitment to volunteer service hours.

**For more information, go to <https://skagitmg.org/home/green-school/>**

To apply for the Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener Program, go to <https://extension.wsu.edu/skagit/mg/apply/>

Syndromes chart below describing characteristics which draw eight different pollinator groups. For example, butterflies prefer flowers shaped like a narrow tube with a spur and a wide landing pad, often in bright red and purple colors. Bats pollinate plants which emit strong musty scents and open at night.



### Pollinator Syndromes

"Pollinator Syndromes" describe flower characteristics, or traits, that may appeal to a particular type of pollinator. Such characteristics can be used to predict the type of pollinator that will aid the flower in successful reproduction. A combination of color, odor, quantity of nectar, location and type of pollen, and flower structure can each affect a potential pollinator's ability to locate a flower and its food resources.









Type of Pollinator								
Trait	Bat	Bee	Beetle	Bird	Butterfly	Fly	Moth	Wind
<b>Color</b>	White, green or purple	Bright white, yellow, blue, or UV	White or green	Scarlet, orange, red or white	Bright red and purple	Pale, or dark brown, purple	Pale red, purple, pink or white	Pale green, brown, or colorless
<b>Nectar guides</b>	None	Present	None	None	Present	None	None	None
<b>Odor</b>	Strong and musty; emitted at night	Fresh, mild, pleasant	None to strongly fruity or foul	None	Faint but fresh	Putrid	Strong sweet; emitted at night	None
<b>Nectar</b>	Abundant; somewhat hidden	Usually present	Sometimes present	Ample; deeply hidden	Ample; deeply hidden	Usually absent	Ample; deeply hidden	None
<b>Pollen</b>	Ample	Limited; often sticky, scented	Ample	Limited	Limited	Limited	Limited	Abundant; small, smooth
<b>Flower Shape</b>	Bowl shaped; closed during day	Shallow; with landing platform; tubular	Large and bowl-shaped	Large, funnel-like; strong perch support	Narrow tube with spur; wide landing pad	Shallow; funnel-like or complex with trap	Regular; tubular without a lip	Regular and small
								

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WWW.POLLINATOR.ORG

In addition to referring to the plant lists for the two local Pollinator Gardens, consider regular visits to the Discovery Garden or local nurseries to check what is blooming each month, or seek out another pollinator garden, such as Pollinator Pathway Northwest at 21 Acres in Woodinville (<https://21acres.org/>).

**Plant several similar plants in close proximity:** Create several extensive, round plantings of each plant to minimize the distance pollinators need to travel to obtain their nutrition and transport pollen. Additionally, experts recommend planting at least three different pollinator plants within each of the three blooming seasons: spring, summer, and fall <sup>3</sup> for maximum benefit.

**Consider a bee lawn:** Adding flowers in with turfgrass can provide a draw for pollinators seeking nectar and/or pollen. The bee lawn is available for human recreation and as an attraction for dozens of species of native bees <sup>4</sup>.

**Use care with chemicals:** For details about chemical use to protect pollinators, see Washington State University Extension bulletin “Pollination and Pollinator Protection” in the references below.

In addition to flowers and plants, home gardeners should be aware of the basic needs of pollinators:

- Appropriate nesting areas Off-season hibernation sites
- Good sun exposure
- Adequate source(s) of water
- And lastly, allow leaves to gather [and self-mulch] on the ground as a haven for insects, birds, and others through winter.



**Left:** In the warmth of summer, the tiger swallowtail butterfly is attracted to lavender. Photo © Shelly Hanks, WSU Photo Services. **Right:** Yellow Welsh poppies bloom from June - August, providing nectar and pollen for bees and butterflies. Photo © Skagit County Master Gardeners.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

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Kari Ranten

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Kari Ranten is a retired journalist and health care communicator who became a certified Skagit County WSU Extension Master Gardener in 2024.

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Questions about home gardening or becoming a master gardener may be directed to Skagit County WSU Extension Office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233; by phone: 360-428-4270; or via the website: [www.skagit.wsu.edu/mg](http://www.skagit.wsu.edu/mg)

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