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More inclusive garden goes beyond typical pollinators

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Syrphid fly adults are not predaceous but the larvae prey on aphids, Scale insects and thrips.

Question: Each year I add more plants to our garden to attract pollinators such as bees and butterflies. This year I would like to add plants for other types of pollinators. What are species in Sonoma County can I support?

Answer: Attracting a wide variety of local pollinator species to your garden is a great goal. While bees and butterflies get a lot of attention, there are many other species that we can provide habitat for.

In general, a pollinator can be anything that helps transfer pollen from the male part of a flower (the stamen), to the female part (the stigma.) With self-pollinating plants, this occurs in the same plant. Cross-pollination happens when pollen is transferred between different plants.

Besides insects and animals, some plants achieve this by wind or water movement.

The bees you observe in your garden might be the most visible pollinator guests to your garden, but here are a few others to consider:

Syrphid flies. In many cases these beneficial insects look strikingly close to bees and wasps. However, one way to differentiate them is by their wings. Bees and wasps have two pairs of wings, while syrphids have a single pair. You'll notice that they can hover over their host flower, hence their common name, hoverflies. Adults of the species eat pollen and nectar, inadvertently spreading pollen throughout a plant or to another plant. As larvae, they consume many pests in the garden including aphids and mealybugs. This is great news for your garden. Syrphid flies can produce several generations within one season, with each larvae consuming several hundred aphids each.

Attracting and encouraging these natural and native predators to flourish in your garden reduces the need for harmful pesticides. This approach also provides a safer environment for other pollinators such as bees. An excellent, easy to grow plant that attracts hoverflies is Sweet Alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*).

Moths. Moths belong to the same order of insects as butterflies (Lepidoptera). While butterflies are active in the daytime, you may not see many moths since most are active at night. However, they are also important pollinators.

Moths are typically attracted to heavily scented nectar-rich plants such as jasmine and gardenia. Trellis these plants if you have limited ground space. Avoid bright lights in the garden area and consider low-wattage LED or motion sensor options. Again, avoiding the use of pesticides allows other nontarget species to thrive in your garden. If you have ceanothus in your yard, keep an eye out for the ceanothus silkmoth (*Hyalophora euryalus*).

Sonoma County hosts a large number of diverse pollinator species. The examples above are a simple introduction to those often overlooked. This spring, take inventory of the plants in your garden. Conduct a search on the range of local pollinators for your specific plants. Research the life stages of these pollinators to pick the best plants for your garden project.

Contributors to this week's column were Robert Williams and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mqsonoma@ucanr.edu.