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Are Your Honeybee Hives Harming Native Pollinators?



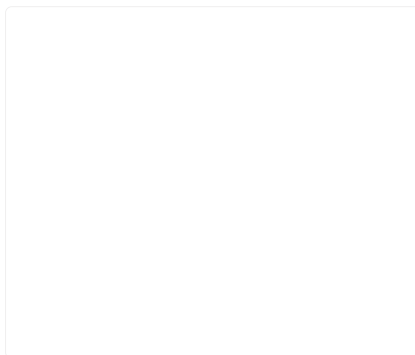
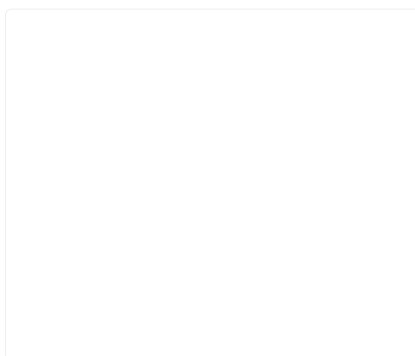
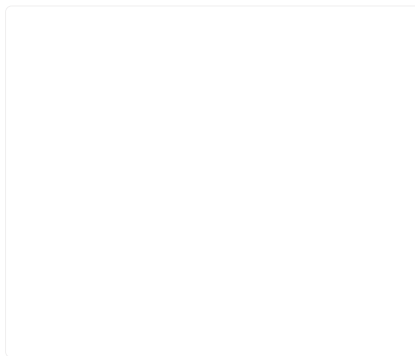
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

[AUG 11, 2022](#) [honeybees, native bees](#)

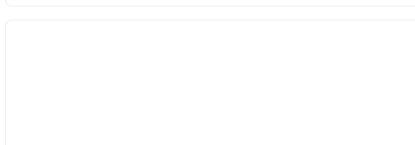


When we hear the word “bees,” most people think of honeybees, but there’s a lot more to the bee world than just honeybees. And as wonderful as backyard honey is, honeybees are not all they’re cracked up to be. Could your backyard hive be hurting native pollinators? And can you protect wild pollinators without giving up your honey? The answer to both questions is yes.

Honeybees



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You have probably heard of **colony collapse disorder** and the decline in honeybee populations that has taken place in recent decades. It is certainly cause for alarm, because humans are remarkably dependent on honeybees. Out of the 25,000 bee species in the world, only four make honey. Besides providing honey and beeswax, honeybees contribute to the pollination of 84% of the crops grown for human consumption (a third of all the food we eat) as well as many crops grown for livestock. The **commercial value** of honeybees in the U.S. alone has been estimated at over \$15 billion per year.

Colony collapse seems to be the result of a **complex of causes** that includes pesticides, loss of habitat, climate change, and disease. We can all help maintain the health of commercial and wild honeybee populations by **avoiding pesticides** in our gardens – especially neonicotinoids – and **cutting our own carbon footprint**. Many of us are also inclined to support honeybee populations by maintaining our own **backyard hives** – an environmental action that comes with the significant side benefit of honey.

Beyond Honeybees

Unfortunately, many actions we take that seem environmentally friendly aren't necessarily beneficial. Although few species make honey, honeybees are far from the only insect species that pollinate plants. And unlike some **4,000 other bee species** in the United States, honeybees are not native. Our hobby hives and reliance on honeybees for agricultural pollination can **harm native bees** in two ways. First, the attention to honeybees distracts us from the real danger of extinction faced by native pollinators and the steps needed to protect them. And even harder to quantify, but possibly more significant, bee-keeping places honeybees in direct competition with native bees for the floral resources they need to survive.



Recognized as [highly effective pollinators](#), many species of mason bees are native to North America.

Pollen for All

Fortunately, we don't have to choose between having our honey and protecting the environment. In environments with sufficient – and sufficiently diverse – resources, both honeybees and wild bees can [thrive together](#). Responsible beekeepers need to actively work on behalf of wild bees as well as their own hives. In addition to maintaining your honeybee hives, consider adding [bee houses](#) for wild species to your garden as well. Also, consider providing [supplemental food](#) sources for your hive bees, especially during seasons and in locations where natural forage is limited. If your hive is having problems with disease, robbing behavior, or increased defensiveness, your bees may not have enough forage. And if your honeybees are not finding enough forage, wild bees are likely struggling as well.

Especially in an urban environment, beekeepers must be mindful of the amount of forage that both kinds of bees need. Create a [bee-friendly garden](#) filled with [plants that pollinators need](#). If you don't have a garden and keep hives on a balcony or rooftop, add as many [container plantings](#) as possible to your available space. While your honeybees won't care about the origin of your flowers, wild bees need [native plants](#). Whether you have a lot of space or a little, maximize the diversity of flowering plants and try to extend the blooming season as much as possible – bees need to eat outside of the peak bloom season. You can do this by planting a variety of flowers with [overlapping bloom cycles](#).

But remember that showy flowers are not the only good food source for bees; you may not even notice when native trees are in flower but a [single mature tree](#) produces an acre's worth of flowers during its bloom time. Because trees take so long to reach maturity, [avoid removing trees](#) whenever possible. Even fallen trees can benefit wild bees as a nest site.

Expanding Access

A single honeybee colony requires an acre's worth of flowers. But few beekeepers have that much space to work with. That's why it's important to think beyond your own fence line when planning your urban hive. Learn as much as you can about native pollinators from the [Xerces Society](#) and consider making a donation. Support legislation or HOA

guidelines that ban harmful pesticides in your community. Communicate with your neighbors about the importance of native plants, mature trees, and pesticide-free gardening. If they are resistant to change, you can always sweeten the deal with some of your own backyard honey.

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Reading time: 3 mins

[Backyard Chickens 101: Getting Started With Laying Hens](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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