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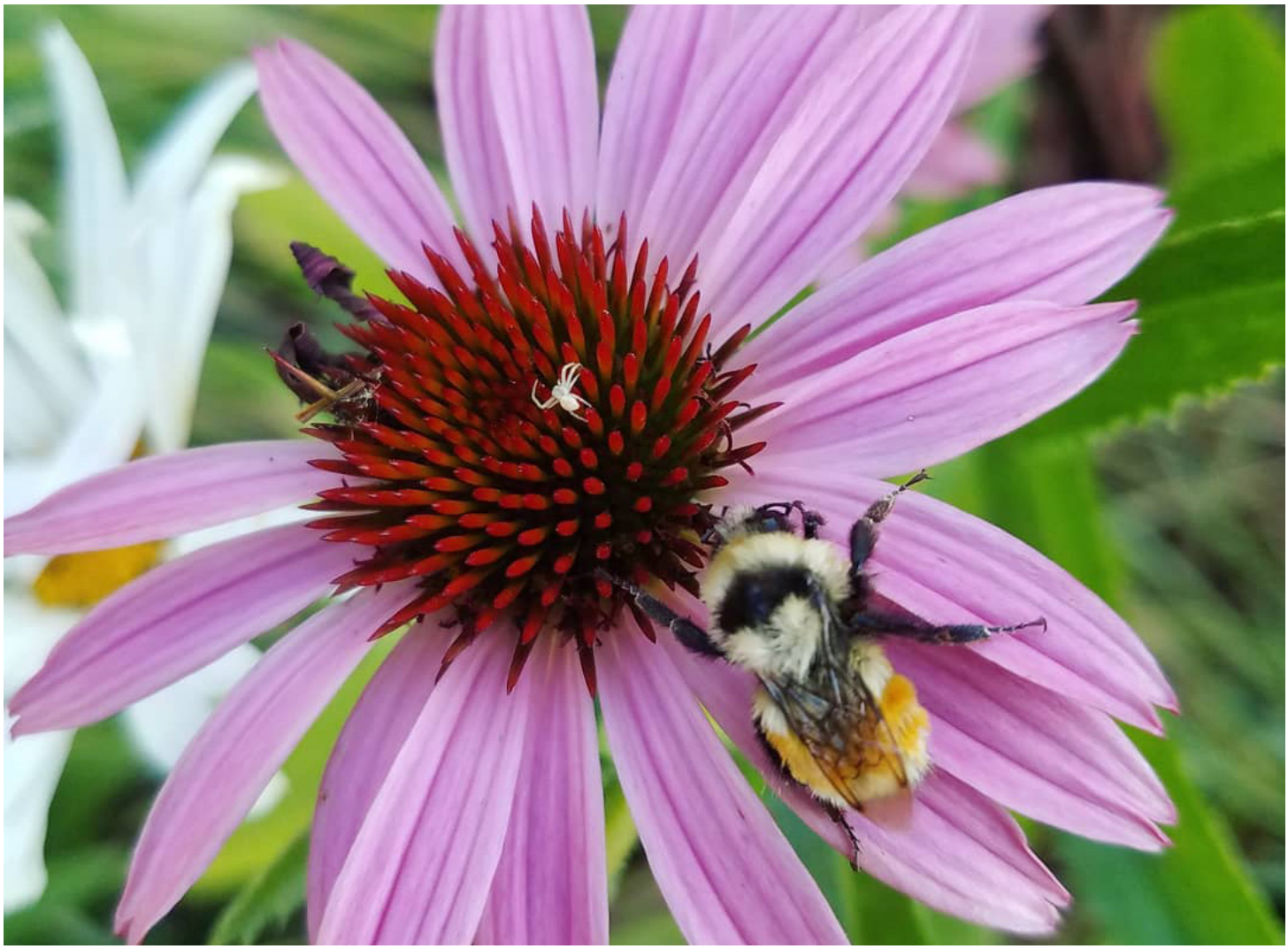


ADA DISTRICT LAUNCHES NEW CAMPAIGN ENCOURAGING TREASURE VALLEY RESIDENTS TO PLANT POLLINATORS IN THEIR GARDENS

By Steve Stuebner

The Ada Soil & Water Conservation District is most excited about their new pollinator campaign, looking ahead to district initiatives in 2021.

The Ada District is inviting Treasure Valley residents to engage in their Treasure Valley Pollinator Project by planting flowering plants in their backyard garden, learn about bees, birds and pollinator species, and then share information in social media to spread the word about the campaign.

Ultimately, the Ada District is hoping to see 64,000 pollinator plants being planted in the Treasure Valley in the spring of 2021 and beyond, officials said. This is the first season of the campaign.

"We all have the potential to be land stewards in our own backyards," said Josie Erskine, District Manager of the Ada District, who has been trialing a number of pollinating plants on her farm to see how they'd do in the Treasure Valley climate.

The Ada District is selling trays of pollinating plants on its web site. You can go online and order a tray of flower-

Yarrow is native to Idaho and beneficial for butterflies and bees.

ing plants today. See more about their plant mixes below.

"The idea is to get as many pollinating plants out there as possible," Erskine says. "As the Treasure Valley has grown in the last 15 years, we're seeing a change toward low-maintenance type of plants in landscaping projects, with rocks and non-blooming species. Over time, that's caused a massive loss of species diversity."

In addition, there are fewer pollinating plants growing on the edges or hedge rows of farm fields, because in some instances, those rows of plants and vegetation no longer exist, so farmers can maximize on crop yields.

The Ada District welcomes any participation from area farms as well, Erskine says. The Conservation Commission has reported on pollinator initiatives for Idaho farmlands in a previous issue, spotlighting a partnership between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Idaho Fish and Game.

Derek Tilley, manager of the NRCS Plant Materials Center (PMC) in Aberdeen, said in our report that he was starting to see the pollinator initiative catching on with farmers in Southern Idaho. Farmers who have existing EQIP contracts with NRCS are open to planting pollinators as an add-on to existing contracts, he said.

The PMC has been growing a pollinator garden in Aberdeen for four years to improve habitat for bees and Western Monarchs.

"You don't need to take valuable farm land out of production," Tilley says. "Everyone has got a patch of ground on their farm that they're not using for crops – maybe corners on their pivots or some marginal ground that could still be used for pollinator habitat. Farmers should be aware that there are benefits for them to have a more diverse array of insects on their farm.

"Certain native insects and wasps can serve as effective predators on nuisance insects that they don't want attacking their crops," he says. "You can bring in predatory insects like wasps to eat the bugs you don't want with pollinator strips next to crops."

Why are pollinators important?

Between 75-95 percent of all flowering plants on the earth need help with pollination – they need pollinators. Pollinators provide pollination services to over 180,000 different plant species and more than 1,200 crops. That means that 1 out of every three bites of food you eat is there because of pollinators, according to the Pollinator Partnership.

In terms of dollars and cents, pollinators add $217 billion dollars to the global economy, and honey bees alone are responsible for between $1.2 and $5.4 billion dollars in agricultural productivity in the United States. In addition to the food that we eat, pollinators support healthy ecosystems that clean the air, stabilize soils, protect from severe weather, and support other wildlife.

According to experts, without pollinators, agricultural economies, our food supply, and surrounding landscapes would collapse.

Who are the pollinators?

Birds, bats, bees, butterflies, beetles, and other small mammals that pollinate plants are responsible for bringing us one out of every three bites of food, according to the Pollinator Partnership. Pollinators sustain our ecosystems and produce our natural resources by helping plants reproduce.

Pollinating animals travel from plant to plant carrying pollen on their bodies in a vital interaction that allows the transfer of genetic material critical to the reproductive system of most flowering plants – the very plants that:

- Bring us countless fruits, vegetables, and nuts
- One-half of world's oils, fibers and raw materials
- Prevent soil erosion
- Increase carbon sequestration.

"This nearly invisible ecosystem service is a precious resource that

requires attention and support," officials say with the Pollinator Partnership.

The rapid decline of Monarch butterflies – A reason to participate

One of the key issues that has brought the importance of pollinators to the fore is the rapid decline of Monarch Butterflies, the Idaho state insect.

"Twenty years ago, Monarch butterflies were common, and now they're in trouble. We've seen a 99 percent decline in their population," Erskine points out.

In the latest Winter 2021 issue of "Windows to Wildlife," published by the non-game staff at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Tempe Regan wrote an article about the decline of Monarchs.

The population of Monarchs declined from 3-10 million butterflies in the 1980s to 200,000-300,000 in the early 2000s. And then in 2018, winter counts of Monarchs in the United States decline to less than 30,000 at over-wintering sites, she wrote.

"The news for 2020 is devastating," Regan wrote. "Fewer than 2,000 butterflies were observed – a greater than 99 percent decline since the 1980s."

The causes of the Monarch's decline include:

- Loss of milkweed and other flowering plants
- Degradation and loss of over-wintering sites in California and widespread use of pesticides

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently denied a petition to list Monarchs under the Endangered Species Act. On Dec. 15, 2020, the USFWS ruled that the listing was "warranted but precluded" due to a backlog of work for 161 other species deemed higher priority.

Can you see it? Bees visit up to 5,000 flowers in a single day.

To help Monarchs, you can plant milkweed and grow pollinator-friendly flowers. Milkweed is the only host for monarch caterpillars, and it is their sole food source.

The Ada District has simplified the process for choosing what flowers to buy by bundling a number of pollinator plants on a tray of flowers that can purchased on their web site, as referenced earlier.

You can purchase four different trays of flowers, depending on your interests. All of the species have been planted locally and trialed at Erskine's farm over the last 10 years.

"Each tray has eight species of flowering plants designated for length of bloom, spring to fall," she says. "There are annuals and perennials. Multiple colors and different-shaped flowers for different species including hummingbirds.

"These flowers can live on low water and they're drought-tolerant," Erskine says.

Ariel Agenbroad, an extension educator for the University of Idaho in Ada County, compliments the Ada District for its leadership, and she's hopeful that citizens will seize on the opportunity to help Monarchs and honey bees, and other pollinators with the project.

"I really hope people get involved," Agenbroad said. "I've certainly had a lot of interest in pollinators in any of the talks I've been giving about that topic. I've always had a large crowd and a lot of interest in the subject.

"People wonder about what things to plant, but the Ada Districts's approach takes all of the guess work about what to buy because you can just order the plant mixes that will work in our climate and environment on their web site."

Citizen Scientists wanted for the pollinator campaign

Another aspect of the pollinator campaign is a "Citizen Science" component. People who plant the flowers can track how the flowers are doing in social media, they can take pictures to share of insects and pollinators eating nectar from the plants, they can ask questions to learn about insect identification, and they can track the progress of the pollinator flowers over time, officials said.

Educational workshops about pollinators will be held in 2021 for people participating in the project.

U of I has a web site where people can submit photos of insects and submit them to experts for identification. See more about that at **https://www.uidaho.edu/extension/insect-id**.

"We're also encouraging people to keep a Citizen Science journal," Erskine says, and track how their pollinator plants and insects are doing in their backyard.

The Ada District is reaching out to area nurseries to spread the word about the campaign, as well as potential partners like Boise Parks & Recreation, Master Gardeners, Idaho Conservation League, and more.

Samantha Wright, a reporter for Boise State Public Radio, plans to participate in the project at her home, and report on progress on "Idaho Matters," a daily talk show news program.

"Growing up in Boise, there were butterflies everywhere. But now they are few and far between and I think some magic has been lost from our lives," Wright says.

"When I first heard about the Treasure Valley Pollinator Project, I realized here was something one person can do to make a difference. So many times we report stories on problems so big and overwhelming that listeners are frustrated because they feel one person cannot make a difference. For this problem of dwindling pollinators, one person can, just by planting some beautiful flowers in their yard.

"So, I will plant some of those flowers and follow the project and the workshops throughout the year to see if it can coax butterflies (and bees, and other pollinators!) back to the Treasure Valley. I'll be following and reporting on the project for the daily noon talk show on Idaho Matters on KBSX 91.5 FM on Boise State Public Radio."

Jessica Harrold is the project manager of the pollinator project for the Ada District, and she's working on outreach with potential partner groups and spreading the word about the project overall.

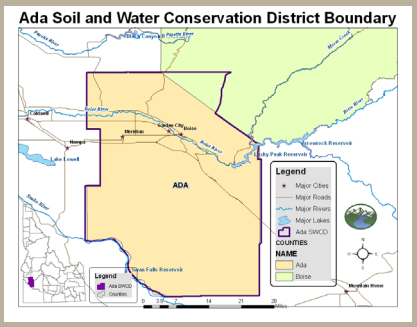
"We are really excited about the pollinator project, and we really encourage people to participate," Harrold said. "This is really something that anyone can do to make a difference by planting pollinating flowers in their garden.

"Join the Treasure Valley Pollinator Project to start your garden, learn how to make your habitat the best it can be for insects, and help us keep track of the pollinators you see in your garden!"

For more information, see the Ada District's web page on the pollinator campaign at **https://adaswcd.square.site**/. For questions, contact Jessica Harrold, j.harrold@adaswcd.org or call 208-863-6949.

To contact Ariel Agenbroad at U of I extension in Boise, ariel@uidaho.edu, or call 208-287-5900.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.



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