

Is There Really a Pollinator Problem?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

I've received a surprising number of questions, in recent weeks, about problems with pollination. Some of these questions were due to recent media reports about troubles with honeybees (more on that shortly). But some of the questions were because garden plants weren't producing veggies.

The latter problem is often a case of impatience. Common garden vegetables like tomatoes, cucumbers and squash, will often start blooming a week or two before they start bearing fruit. In the case of vine crops, there are separate male and female flowers and the male flowers start blooming several days before the female flowers do. With tomatoes and peppers, temperatures over 90 degrees will prevent blossoms from setting on, especially early in the blooming season. A little bit of patience will take care of these issues.

While there is a big concern over lack of pollinators, as well there should be, I don't think we've seen a problem with this locally, at least yet. Many of our food plants depend on insect pollination to produce. In general, anything with a showy flower is probably trying to attract an insect to aid it in pollination. Even in cases where plants with showy flowers may be self fruitful, like some of our fruit trees, having insect pollinators will usually increase production.

When people think of insect pollinators most immediately think of honeybees. But keep in mind that honeybees are not native to North America so there were many other bees and wasps that were pollinating plants long before European settlers brought honeybees to the continent. We still depend on many of these native pollinators, like bumblebees, sweat bees, orchard bees, mason bees, flower bees and many of the ground nesting solitary bees. Populations of these bees will fluctuate from year to year based on availability of food which is going to be directly related to weather. A couple of years of drought are certainly going to reduce the numbers of these bees!

But far and away we do depend, very heavily, on honeybees to shoulder the load of plant pollination. So are the threats to the honeybees real or over-hyped? From my perspective, as a former beekeeper and one who follows this closely, it is very real. There have always been issues with bee health and the past couple of decades have forced beekeepers to deal with a couple of mite issues. But these issues were identified and strategies to manage the mites have been worked out.

Of a far bigger concern is the condition known as Colony Collapse Disorder or CCD. CCD has been very devastating for many large commercial beekeeping operations who have lost as many as one half of their hives, or more, during winters. Many different culprits have been blamed and an international group of honeybee experts have been working on this problem for many years. The knowledge base of honeybees has exploded from all of this research. But what hasn't been found yet is a "smoking gun" that we can blame CCD on.

Everything from global warming to cell phones to pesticides have been blamed and so far there has been no consistent issue found. Cell phones have been ruled out though! Pesticides certainly can have an impact on bee health, and particular groups of pesticides have been implicated, and even banned in Europe, but no consistent results have turned up. Certainly stress from several different sources plays an impact on bee health, just as it does with humans. So as of yet, we aren't at a pollinator crisis stage, and I hope we don't get there. If you have questions about pollinators though, I'd be more than happy to visit with you about the topic!

