



Know the Habitat on your Farm

In order to farm for crop pollinators, it is important to know the habitat on your farm. Native bees need both food and shelter—they eat only pollen and nectar and they nest in tunnels or in the ground. In the process of gathering pollen and nectar resources, bees move pollen from one flower to another, and thus pollinate your crops. Bees rely upon an abundance and variety of flowers, and need blooming plants throughout the growing season. Native bees don't build the wax or paper structures we associate with honey bees or wasps, but they do need places to nest, which vary depending on the species. Wood-nesting bees are solitary, often making individual nests in beetle tunnels in standing dead trees. Ground-nesting bees include solitary species that construct nest tunnels under the ground. Cavity-nesting social species—bumble bees—make use of small spaces, such as abandoned rodent burrows, wherever they can find them. Using the illustration below as a guide, look for areas on and around your land that can support native bees.



Illustration by Andrew Holder.

Hedgerows or Windbreaks



Creating hedgerows with a wide variety of plants that have overlapping flowering periods will provide bee habitat throughout the growing season and strengthen populations of natural enemies of crop pests.

Riparian Buffers



Habitat along streams should contain a diversity of plants. Willows, in particular, will nourish bumble bee queens in the spring so that large numbers of workers are available when crops begin to bloom.

Natural or Undeveloped Areas



Nearby natural areas may harbor all the native bees needed to pollinate your farm's crops. Consider inviting your neighbors to help with safeguarding these habitats.

Artificial Nests



Making bee blocks for wood-nesting bees is a good way to increase the number of native bees in your landscape.

Snags



Keeping dead trees standing provides shelter for native bees. Some solitary bees build nests in abandoned beetle tunnels in snags.

Field and Road Borders



Leave areas next to fields untilled and unsprayed to support flowering plants and provide nest sites for ground-nesting bees.

Cover Crops



Flowering plants—certain legumes in particular—can be included in cover crop mixes to supply pollen and nectar.

Temporary Bee Pasture



Planting fields with canola or other inexpensive seed—or allowing crops such as lettuce, kale, basil, and broccoli to bolt—will supply bees with nectar and pollen.

Ponds and Ditches



When you create a pond or ditch, leave the pile of excavated soil. Ground-nesting bees may build nests in stable, bare areas of this mounded earth. Planting clumps of native flowers will attract more pollinators.

Gardens



A vegetable, flower, or herb garden, with a diverse assortment of plants, is a good source of food for pollinators. Be wary of fancy hybrids that may produce little pollen or nectar.

Fallow Fields



Even small areas of fallow or unproductive land, especially when sown with native flowers, can offer important resources for native bees