

Honeybees Need Weeds

Honeybees live as a colony all year long. They do not hibernate. When the weather is bad or no flowers are blooming, they live inside the hive eating food stored there. They eat honey as their carbohydrate and pollen as their protein.

A colony needs about 70 pounds of stored honey to live November – March in the Pacific NW. To get and store that much food, in addition to the hundreds of pounds of honey they eat all year long, they need to find high quality nectar and pollen from March – October when most flowers are blooming.



Blackberry nectar and pollen is the most important food for honeybees in Western Washington. It provides the most nectar, allowing bees to store food for winter and perhaps providing some excess for beekeepers to harvest.

Blackberry nectar and pollen also has been found to contain extremely high levels of important nutrients needed to keep honeybees healthy and help the colony deal with pests, pathogens, bacteria and disease.

Considered a Class C noxious weed, control for blackberry is decided at the local level. It can be cut back and managed rather than eliminated completely. For the sake of bees, please keep and control some blackberry rather than removing it.

When controlling plants that you consider to be “weeds”, please consider hand removal before spraying.

Many sprays may be listed as “safe for bees” but research has shown that herbicide and pesticide residues build up in the wax of honeycomb and can become toxic to the colony within three to five years. Those chemicals drift to the hive during application and also are brought to the hive when bees visit plants and flowers that have been sprayed.

If you spray to remove plants, please:

- Read all instructions carefully.
- Use the lowest dosage and least amount of chemical needed. Do not overspray.
- Do not apply sprays when flowers are in bloom.
- Spray early in the morning or late in the evening when there is less wind.
- If the plants you remove are important food for bees, such as blackberry, please consider replacing that food for bees.

The Xerces Society has a comprehensive list of non-invasive plants for the Pacific Northwest: xerces.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/MaritimeNorthwestPlantList.pdf

Many seed supply companies provide seed blends for pollinators.

Plants that are good bee forage include:

Anise, Asters, Black-eyed Susan, Borage, Catnip, Clover, Coreopsis, Coriander/Cilantro, Cornflower, Corn Poppy, Cosmos, Forget-me-not, Hyssop, Lemon Balm, Mints, Mustards, Kale Phacelia, Sedum.

Herbs that fully flower are a powerhouse of important nutrients for honeybees and many other pollinators. Include these plants in your garden, let them fully flower. You will be amazed at the number of pollinators that visit:

Thyme, oregano, lavender, basil, mint, coriander/cilantro, sage (especially Russian), and other culinary herbs.

Pierce County Beekeepers Association, 2014
www.pcbeekeepers.org