

Zoo To You Article

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Topic: Pollinator plantings help spring come to life.

It seems like the March wind has been roaring like a lion for most of the month. Whether it goes out like a lamb or not is still to be seen, but one thing is for sure, spring is here! The first official day of spring was March 20th, and if you have yet to start planning your various planting projects, we've got some ideas for you.

Putting in plants that are friendly to butterflies and other pollinators will bring beauty and activity to any area. Supporting these native pollinators relies on native plants (wildflowers, herbs, etc..) that are better adapted to the region than exotic plants. Pollinators play an important role in agriculture and spark the imagination of those around them (flight of the bumblebee; float like a butterfly, sting like a bee; butterflies are free; busy as a bee; the bee's knees, etc....). While they've been around all your life, their future is in question. Their numbers are declining, and they need our help.

Monarch butterflies spend the winter in Mexico. The recent census shows a decline of 90 percent over the last twenty years. Hurricanes during their previous migration played a role in the continuing decline but habitat loss in their spring and summer breeding habitats here in the United States, including Kansas, is a challenge the species has been fighting for years. The caterpillars have one host plant, one plant that serves as the sole source of food for the caterpillars: milkweed. With the rapid loss of this plant throughout their central flyway, as well as the nectar plants which provide food for the adult butterflies, it's a recipe for disaster.

Going native with your plantings doesn't just help Monarch butterflies. It aids honeybees (the Kansas state insect) and other native pollinators too. Planting a variety of shapes and sizes of native wildflowers will support a variety of pollinators. Having something in bloom each season (spring, summer, and fall) also broadens the species you reach. You can even install a bee hotel in your yard. You can find these at various garden stores, or even make your own. And don't forget a water source. It doesn't have to be much, but especially during this time of drought, it is very important.

Bordering your fruit and vegetable garden with native flowers will improve the pollination of your crops. It will also help the bees, butterflies, and other pollinators when your crops are no longer blooming.

Some pollinators that may be attracted to your native flowers also help control crop pests making it a win-win situation for you and the pollinators.

You won't be doing this by yourself, and your participation would help a great deal. Many communities, cities, and individuals have responded to the call for assistance and are planting with the goal of helping Monarchs and other pollinators make a comeback. If you want to join in, there's still time to put your plan into action. After all, our last frost is still to come if Mother Nature follows her regular pattern.

There are many websites that offer information on helping pollinators: ksoutdoors.com, NWF.org, xerces.org, and more. Be sure to stroll by the Butterfly Garden at the zoo on your next visit and check out our Pollinator Pals.