

Swarming and Pollinator Protection

There's an old English proverb that says:

A swarm in May is worth a load of hay.

A swarm in June is worth a silver spoon.

A swarm in July ain't worth a fly.

In early spring, honey bees can be seen swarming, or gathering in large clusters outside of a hive. To some this is a nightmare situation, especially if your home, car or backyard is their location of choice. Although a ball of bees may seem scary, this is a natural reaction to poor hive conditions. The primary cause of swarming is believed to be congestion of the brood nest area. Just like all of us, when bees outgrow their home, they know it's time to move on.

These swarms have two forms; primary and secondary. The primary swarm contains the old queen, drone bees and about 60% of the worker bees from the original colony. These swarms are larger than secondary swarms and they tend to settle on nearby structures before they depart to a new nest.

Secondary swarms contain a newly emerged queen bee and the remaining bees from the primary swarm. These swarms are more easily tempted into nearby bait hives.

As both of these swarms rest on nearby structures, most often trees, scout bees set out to find a new hive. Once a suitable location is found, such as a log or another cavity, the swarm will relocate to that site and begin to nest.

If you find a swarm in your area use the following link to contact a beekeeper who may be willing to remove the swarm: <https://entomology.k-state.edu/extension/current-topics/honey-bee-swarms.html>

Many of us may never experience swarming, but spring is still an excellent time to consider bees and other pollinators! The following are just a few things you can do in your yard to help pollinators thrive.

- Plant pollinator friendly plants—of course! This is an obvious first step, as these plants serve as pollinator food! Incorporate flowering trees, shrubs, perennials and annuals into your garden. Try to have something blooming during the entire growing season. On May 5th, the Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Plant Sale will have pollinator friendly plants specifically marked. Many lists are also available online, just make sure the plants are regionally appropriate.
- When purchasing plants for your garden, say no to neonicotinoids pesticides. Many garden centers and greenhouses are moving away from using these pesticides, but many are not, and labeling does not always disclose this information. Saying no to these pesticides also means accepting bite marks and blemishes on your nursery plants. These pesticides have their purpose and if protecting pollinators is your highest priority, plant quality must take a backseat.

- Limit home use of pesticides. Often when calls come into the Extension Master Gardener Response Line for insects, pesticides are one of the only solutions left for the season. Scouting for pests early can open up a tool chest of alternative options. Know your plants and know their enemies! Look for tiny holes in your rose leaves and chomped ends of tomato leaves. Seeing pest signs early increases the likelihood than nets, handpicking and bursts of water will be effective control. For bee care specifically, spray pesticides in the evening when they are least active. Additional tips for homeowners using pesticides can be found at: <https://www.epa.gov/safepestcontrol/tips-reducing-pesticide-impacts-wildlife>
- Don't assume "organic" means "safe". Organic pesticides have the same goal as all the others—killing insects. Organic pesticides are no safer to pollinators than other products.
- Avoid spraying pesticides during flower budding or blooming. If you do have to spray, try to avoid this short window when the pesticides will most likely penetrate the flower and its nectar.
- Spread the word! Most of us don't have enough land to support a single bee hive, even with fence to fence flowers. Help your friends and neighbors incorporate pollinator plants into their yards and encourage appropriate use of pesticides!

When using pesticides always follow the label directions. Many pesticides are only effective during a certain life stage for that pest so proper identification and timing are keys to successful eradication without applying unnecessarily. Proper pesticide use helps to preserve our wildlife, water and soil!

Growing and using edible and ornamental herbs is an art form! Herbs can be grown outside or inside, they add fun and flavor to any meal and are a wonderful addition to any garden or home. Extension Master Gardener Carol Bragdon will present "Growing and Using Herbs" at the Topeka & Shawnee County Library on April 26th at 7pm in Marvin Auditorium 101C.