

Bees Please!

By Betsy Smith, horticultural consultant and garden designer, affiliated with Just Fruits and Exotics Nursery

The nursery has bees; two hives buzzing with life on a quiet corner of the property. Since their arrival they have been spotted around the sales area carrying out their role as nature's greatest pollinators. Of course their work is essential to the production of a great many fruits and local honey is delightful but their role in the infrastructure of life as we know it goes far beyond that.



by

Bee society predates that of humans 77 million years. Their development coincided with that of the flowering plants and they depend on each other. We absolutely depend on the renewal of plant life through fruit and seed production. That is why the huge losses sustained by beekeepers nationwide has been so prominent in the news. Colony collapse disorder has made people aware that their food supply depends on an insect.



In fact bees have been in trouble for over 20 years, since the accidental importation of two species of parasitic mites. These weaken bees and allow viruses to invade the hive. For this reason, beekeeping in the U.S. and many other parts of the world has become an endangered profession. Wild bees, the greatest majority of which are solitary,

have sustained an even greater loss.

At the nursery we're putting together a bee habitat to demonstrate what bees need throughout the year. We'll have a sampling of our commercially important honey plants: Ogeechee tupelo, of course; spring flowering titi, sourwood and palmetto. There will be a background of hollies including both East Palatka and yaupon. Citrus and blueberries are a possibility and there will be wild flowers such as our native swamp sunflower. July and August are lean months for bees, especially with so much natural habitat being lost to development. Fortunately, popular summer bloomers such as vitex and crape myrtle provide much needed nourishment.



In winter resourceful bees seek out blooming camellias and tea olives to supplement their diet. Lawn and roadside weeds such as clover and plantain are such valuable early season nectar sources that homeowners might want to consider a less manicured, bee friendly look for their lawn.

Bees have been referred to as canaries in the coal mine of habitat degradation. They are particularly susceptible to pesticides that are applied to or drifting toward blooming plants. One contaminated bee can kill a whole hive of 60,000 individuals. There are a number of very effective pesticides such as Bt for caterpillars or all season spray oil for scale that are virtually harmless to bees and these should be your first line of defense.

Finally, if you want to help bees, buy and eat lots of local honey. Most commercial honey now comes from China and Argentina. A thriving honey economy will go a long way towards keeping the bee's needs and our own in the public eye.