



Planting for pollinators: shedding light on the importance of shade – Part 1

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When most people imagine pollinator-friendly habitat, it invokes images of bright, sunny gardens bursting with vivid blooms, or prairies crowded with colorful wildflowers, blazing in full sun. While these sun-drenched expanses do provide excellent resources for foraging pollinators, it certainly isn't the only type of habitat used by pollinators. Shady habitat is ecologically unique and can provide necessary food resources and shelter for pollinators.



Hepatica is one of the first wildflowers to bloom, before trees even leaf out. Photo credit: Laura Jach Smith

Whether your yard has shade or not, there is something that everyone can do to create new, or enhance current, shady areas for pollinators. Look around your property – what shady areas do you have? The north or east sides of your house? Do you have any woodland edges, fence lines, north-facing slopes, hedgerows, or spaces under trees? Maybe these are shady for part of most of the day. Now consider if they are shady year-round? Most likely, some of these areas are not shaded year-round and receive part-sun or filtered light in the early spring, which



Queen bumble bee on a bloom of native Missouri gooseberry in early spring. Photo credit: Laura Jach Smith

makes it a particularly important habitat for some of our native bees. Some bees start to emerge before most of our wildflower meadows or pollinator gardens even have their first bloom! Queen bumble bees are one of the first pollinators in early spring to buzz hungrily around in pursuit of food sources. A queen needs energy after her long winter slumber to select a nest site and begin to raise her brood. Along with queen bumble bees, many solitary native bees awaken before most fruit trees and forbs are flowering, which is why native, early blooming trees, shrubs, and spring ephemerals are extremely important for our pollinators, and should be used to create or enhance a shady spot in your yard.

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Photo: Spring beauty miner, (c) Riley Walsh, some rights reserved (CC BY-NC), <https://www.inaturalist.org/photos/271677076>

Delicate spring ephemerals emerge every spring from a carpet of last year's tree and shrub leaf litter. In fact, it is the leaf litter that heats up in spring and helps to break the flower's winter dormancy. These blooms can be found carpeting high quality woodlands with low disturbance history. Ephemerals are excellent and reliable forage for pollinators, but sadly represent a minority of landcover now and often are in a state of invasive species succession. Although native spring ephemerals may be less abundant at your native plant nurseries, many of these species are good at self-propagating once established and can make great garden specimens.

Hepatica, spring beauties, dutchman's breeches, wood anemones, bluebells, bloodroot, trout lily, trilliums, and

Mayapples are all gold for our early-emerging native bees. Some spring ephemerals are even associated with specialists, such as the spring beauty mining bee (*Andrena erigeniae*). These solitary, ground nesting native bees awake in early spring to forage on the lavender-colored pollen of spring beauties, and have the lavender pollen collected on their leg hairs to prove it!

As spring turns to summer, many of the spring ephemerals quickly disappear, and finally the sunny pollinator gardens become abuzz with activity. If you don't have any sunny spots for a pollinator garden, or you're looking to enhance those shady areas for year-round nectar sources, there are plenty of flowering forbs and native grasses, sedges and ferns that can make a beautiful and valuable spot for pollinators. Under tree canopies are great places to plant shade-tolerant wild geraniums, which also have no problem making their way up through the leaf litter. Other great shade-tolerant species include wild ginger, early meadowrue, columbine, gentians, Virginia waterleaf, Thimbleberry, Solomon's seal, Jacob's ladder, woodland phlox and violets. There are several different asters and goldenrods that are woodland species, and tolerant to shade or partial shade too (such as big leaf aster, woodland asters, zigzag, and blue-stemmed goldenrod). Check out the Ecoregional Planting Guides from P2 to find the native species appropriate to your area: <https://www.pollinator.org/guides>.



Woodland phlox is a colorful favorite. Photo credit: Laura Jach Smith

Pollinators need forage throughout the entire season, so having a variety of species with successional bloom times from early spring through late fall is a hallmark of good pollinator habitat – don't overlook the value of shady areas, our pollinators will thank you!

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