If we build it, the bees will come

Feb 28, 2012 by Kathryn Gilje

Last weekend, my backyard beehive was once again the hub of attention. My nieces (4 and 5 years old) are visiting, so we pulled on bee suits and went out to take a deep look into the hive.

The bees themselves are fascinating to observe, each with their own specialized job, deep into the magic of pollination, building the hive and making honey.

The hubbub around the hive also gave me the chance to talk about how bees and pollinators around the world are in trouble, and how it's up to us, this generation, to make a change.

Today, PAN and Beyond Pesticides are launching our Honey Bee Haven website, where you can meet others who — in the face of policymaker inaction — are building a groundswell of support for honey bees and other pollinators.

We invite you to join us and people across the country to make support for bees visible, to sign the Honey Bee Haven pledge and put your haven on the map. You don't need a beehive to take part, though that's certainly one option.

Something is terribly wrong with our food and farming system, and if we take steps that restore the bees, we'll be doing right by our health and ecosystems, too. In these deeply trying economic and political times, I'm amazed at how much hope per bee the hive can generate, just by doing its thing.

The bee backstory

Bees have been dying in droves around the world since the mid-1990's. This phenomenon hit the U.S. hard in 2006, and each year thereafter. Despite science that shows a key part of the problem is increased exposure to a class of systemic pesticides (neonicotinoids), policymakers and the pesticide industry have failed to act.

Yet in the face of these dire trends, a hopeful grassroots movement of backyard beekeeping is emerging around the country. It's one way we can bring back the bees, while continuing to push EPA to take action.

Even if you can’t keep bees, creating a Honey Bee Haven where you live is powerful. A few bee-friendly plants in containers on your front stoop or balcony will get you started. Here's what a haven entails:

1. **Protect bees from pesticides.** Pesticides kill beneficial insects including pollinators and natural enemies of pesky garden pests. Instead of using pesticides, explore organic ways to grow healthy plants, such as using compost for healthy soil and controlling pests with homemade remedies and biocontrols like ladybugs.

2. **Provide a variety of food for bees.** Consider clustered plantings with staggered blooming times so there is food throughout the year and particularly in the late summer and fall. Native plants are always best, and inter-planting and hedgerows provide additional forage on farms.

3. **Provide a year-round, clean source of water for bees.** This can be a river, pond, irrigation system, rainwater collection system or small-scale garden water features. Shallow water sources can provide more than enough water for bees, without creating opportunities for mosquitoes to breed.

4. **Provide shelter for bees.** Leave some ground undisturbed and untilled and some dead trees and plants on the property for wild bees.

Join us online in the Honey Bee Haven space, sharing stories of hope and bees from across the country. Share what you're doing and be part of the groundswell that will, one day, bring back the bees.

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