Science Societies

Making your lawn better for bees

By Shea Topel

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Pollinator lawns are emerging as a popular, more sustainable alternative to traditional lawns, offering environmental benefits like improved biodiversity and reduced pesticide use while still serving everyday outdoor functions. Although interest is growing, barriers such as cost, soil conditions, and uncertainty about how to establish them can discourage adoption.

Education and clearer definitions can help more people transition to pollinator-friendly landscapes.

This article is part of our Down to Earth series, which breaks down and explains food, farming, and environmental sciences for readers of all backgrounds, including those without formal scientific training.

People have been growing interested in more environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional lawns, and pollinator lawns are one of the most popular. Despite this, they aren't always easy to adopt. A recent study published in the journal *Agricultural & Environmental Letters* set out to identify the most common obstacles to people establishing pollinator lawns. There were two main issues: the overall cost and soil conditions on the site.

People considering starting a pollinator lawn had a lot more concerns than people who already had them. Because of these concerns, researchers identified the need to inform people on how to start one effectively and affordably.

Why pollinator lawns are gaining attention

Lawns are everywhere, from homes and parks to roadsides and athletic fields. They can help regulate local temperatures, stabilize soils to prevent erosion, and filter runoff water. Culturally they provide us with rest, relaxation, and recreation for social and individual activities. Most people living in urban environments really enjoy lawns, but

sadly, they can also cause problems for the environment. The improper use of pesticides and herbicides can impact local water quality and harm biodiversity. Gas-powered and electric mowers contribute to high emissions while lowering the biodiversity of local plant life. Lastly, the labor and cost needed to water, fertilize, and apply pesticides to the typical lawn is immense, which causes many people to seek alternatives.

Because of the above issues, public land managers, urban planners, and members of the public have been asking for alternatives to traditional lawns. One popular way that people can establish pollinator lawns is by introducing low-growing flowering plants that work with turfgrass to transform lawns into forage habitat for pollinators like bees.



The improper use of pesticides and herbicides can impact local water quality and harm biodiversity. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Grandbrothers.

Pollinator lawns are comprised of grasses and flowers that let bees and other pollinators flourish while still being usable for recreation. Plants such as creeping thyme, white clover, lanceleaf self-heal, and fine fescues are used in cooler climates. Warmer climates often see species such as daisy, white clover, crocus, grape hyacinth, and bermudagrass. These lawns take less effort to maintain while also being better for the environment.

Barriers and opportunities for adoption

Of course, there are a lot of tough decisions to be made before starting a pollinator lawn. People need time and resources to start one, they need good instructions on

how to start, and there's always concern about what their neighbors might think. This makes people nervous about starting pollinator lawns.

From May to August 2024, an online survey was conducted with people who were likely to start a pollinator lawn and those who already had established one. The survey had questions about how people defined pollinator lawns, challenges for establishing them, and perceived challenges for people wanting to establish them. It also gauged pollinator lawn owners perceptions of success and satisfaction.

The answers showed that the public's understanding of pollinator lawns is not tied to specific species, vegetation, or management practices. When educators define what a pollinator lawn is beyond just the presence of bees and other pollinators, it helps get more people interested in starting them. The educators can then teach people how to reduce pesticide use, host live gardening events, and start pollinator lawns. This can help break down the idea that lawns need to be traditionally "neat" and "tidy" and instead prioritize environmental safety, water usage, and ease of management.



For educators, it can be helpful to break down the idea that lawns need to be traditionally "neat" and "tidy" and instead prioritize environmental safety, water usage, and ease of management. AI-generated image courtesy of Adobe Firefly.

According to the survey, the biggest challenges in establishing pollinators lawns for people who already had them were weather conditions (30%), pests (27%), seed prices (26%), and bad soil conditions (25%). The top three issues for people wanting to start a pollinator lawn were costs, site preparation, and poor soil. If pollinator lawns are too expensive, then their adoption will be limited. To deal with this, research suggests adding some non-native plants with high yields and low costs while ensuring that native species have enough space to breed and thrive. Non-native plant species can provide nectar for bees, but some native bees can't use their pollen to reproduce.

Though the cost and preparation are difficult to surmount, the rising interest in pollinator lawns has been a wake-up call for the industry to invest more into

alternative seed mixes while giving educators the opportunity to spread the word to help promote pollinator habitat across America.

Dig deeper

Barnes, M. R., Moncada, K.M., & Watkins, E. (2025). Identifying challenges in establishing pollinator lawns among current and potential owners. *Agricultural & Environmental Letters, 10.* https://doi.org/10.1002/ael2.70044

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