

<http://www.xerces.org/2011/02/10/tuesdays-tips-disappearing-bumble-bees/>

Tuesday's Tips – Disappearing Bumble Bees

Bees and Chicks: Adventures in organic gardening and beekeeping

We've written a lot about Colony Collapse Disorder and the nearly overwhelming problems that affect honey bees, but things are at least as dire for our native bees, most notably the lovely bumble bee.

Bumbles are the stuff of our childhood memories. Who, when remembering walks through wildflower fields, doesn't see in their mind's eye fuzzy, funny bumble bees drifting from flower to flower? These pollinators were plentiful years ago, but now, like many plants and animals, bumbles are suffering from loss of habitat, pesticide poisoning, changing climates, and diseases that were introduced along with non-native bees.

There are almost 50 bumble bee species native to North America and many of them are threatened not with just a serious decline in numbers, but with extinction. In a report published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, a study done over the last three years shows a widespread pattern of decline in bumble bee populations. The western bumble bee, the rusty-patched bumble bee and yellow-banded bumble bee used to be very common, but their numbers have decreased by 96 percent and their range shrunk by as much as 87 percent. (This is video Native Bumblebees features an interview with Scott Black of the Xerces Society who's been tracking the disappearance of the western bumble bees in Oregon.) Franklin's bumble bee, found in a relatively small area covering southern Oregon and northern California, is now thought to be extinct.

Many other bumble bee species have also experienced serious declines in their numbers and ranges which is a big problem because bumbles are an important pollinator for high-value crops such as cranberries, blueberries and clover. They are also important elements in many ecosystems, pollinating wildflowers and plants that produce seeds and fruits that feed everything from songbirds to bears.

Bumble bees are unique in that they are able to fly in colder weather than other bee species and this makes them key pollinators for native plants in the tundra, prairie and higher elevation climates. In fact bumble bees are the most effective pollinators for certain plants and seem to have evolved along with particular species of plants — the length of their tongues is exactly what is required to pollinate them. So if that particular pollinator is in decline you can reasonably expect that the plant that depends on it will decline as well. And that's exactly what appears to have happened in parts of Britain and the Netherlands where native insect-pollinated plants have declined along with bee populations.

There are many ways you can help bumbles survive and perhaps thrive. The most important is DON'T USE PESTICIDES in your gardens. The stuff on the shelf at your local big box stores and nurseries is dangerous to man and beast. Really, this stuff will poison you, your kids, the

dog, the cat, the chickens, and any other creatures that happen to be in the vicinity. Make a resolution to forego poisons in your garden this year. (We'll write a post or two about organic alternatives and how to safely use them in your garden soon.)

Other ways to help the bumble bees:

- * Plant natives in your garden and plan for a succession of pollen and nectar-bearing blooms throughout the season.

- * Bumbles like asters, bee balm, blueberries, borage, clovers, lupines, mints, and rhododendrons to name a few.

- * Bumbles will nest lots of different places like logs, trees, old mouse burrows and grass tussocks. Leave a bit of your land wild if you can.

- * Bumbles are very gentle and won't act in a threatening manner. If you find a nest move away slowly and walk softly and they'll leave you alone.

- * Learn to identify the different types of bumble bees. Free I.D. guides can be downloaded [here](#).

- * You can participate in studies that are tracking bumble bees. Athena Anderson at the University of Georgia has developed a nest site survey to learn more about nest site and habitat features for bumble bees throughout North America and make this information available to anyone at no cost. If you find a bumble bee nest, please click on this link to fill out the survey and increase our knowledge of the range of native bumble bees: [Bumble Bee Nest Survey](#)

- * The Xerces Society has asked that folks send them photos of yellow-banded and rusty-patched bumble bees and the locations where they were spotted. Email to bumblebeesatxercesdotorg

May the bumbles be with you! Mary Beth and Barbara

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