

Trees and Shrubs for Pollinators

By Elizabeth Craig

When gardeners think of creating a pollinator garden, they usually visualize a sunny wildflower meadow or blooming perennial bed, since that's where people see the bees and butterflies. They might consider removing trees or large shrubs to provide more light for growing sun loving perennials and annuals. It can be a surprise to learn native trees and shrubs are an essential component, the backbone of a good pollinator garden. If you plant a tree, such as American basswood or linden, that offers nectar and pollen for bees, the tree can offer thousands of flowers and dramatically increase the scale of floral resources in the garden.

Native trees and shrubs have co-evolved with pollinators and provide key sources of nectar and pollen for bees, beetles, butterflies and birds. In a mutually beneficial relationship, native



Eastern tiger swallowtail butterfly.



Linden tree, also known as American basswood, blooms in summer and is host to the eastern tiger swallowtail caterpillar, shown below.



plants provide the nectar and pollen (carbohydrates and protein) pollinators need and in exchange the pollinators pollinate, assisting the plant in reproduction.

These native trees and shrubs are also important as butterfly and moth host plants, hosts for the larval or caterpillar life stage of the butterfly or moth. The adult butterfly will lay eggs on the leaves. When they hatch, the hungry caterpillars eat the leaves. Generally, this feeding does not damage the tree. Eggs are laid high in the canopy; it is likely you will never see the eggs and rarely see caterpillars.

Our yellow Eastern Tiger Swallowtail caterpillar evolved with, and requires, one of these host plants: tulip tree, wild black cherry, basswood or linden, and sweet bay magnolia. The swallowtail caterpillar needs to eat these leaves to become a butterfly. All trees mentioned are flowering and also excellent nectar and pollen sources.

Use native shrubs and trees to add beauty and fill the gaps in your garden's succession of bloom, you can extend the bloom period on

A favorite list of trees and shrubs for pollinators

<http://www.treesforever.org/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=00P0e00000wOtt1EAC>

either side of the growing season, from March to December. In early spring (March to April) native silver or red maples and willows are first to bloom. Native maples are the big early pollen and nectar source for bees and are a host plant to 284 caterpillars. Many don't think of maples as flowering specimens, with their small red flowers, but look for maples in March, covered with tiny red blooms silhouetted against the bright blue spring sky.

Pussy willow, an old time favorite, or black willow, are great additions to any garden. Native willows supply nectar-rich flowers adored by bees and other wildlife early in the season when they need it most. Some 455 species of caterpillar use native willows as host plants. Other important spring flowering trees include: tulip tree, catalpa, horse chestnut or buckeye, fruit trees and crabapples.

A few spring blooming shrubs for pollinators are: spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), blueberry (*Vaccinium* species), native viburnum species, shadblow or serviceberry (*Amelanchier* spp), flame azalea (*Rhododendron calendulaceum*) which is of special value to bumblebees, and Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) which has great fall color.

As summer sets in, by early July, American basswood or linden, the "bee tree," blooms. It provides a rich source of nectar, and mature trees have heavy pollinator activity. Summer shrubs for pollinators can fill mid-summer gaps in perennial blooms: Carolina allspice (*Calycanthus floridus*), button bush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), summersweet (*Clethra alniflora*), and New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*).

Extend your bloom period into late fall with witch hazel (*Hammamelis virginiana*), a shrub or small tree with showy yellow, fragrant flowers that bloom from October into December, persisting after leaf drop. "I lie on my back with joy under its boughs while it's leaves fall, it blossoms spring," Henry David Thoreau, on witchhazel in bloom.

For a better pollinator garden, include native shrubs and trees that bloom early in the spring, as well as ones that will attract heavy pollinator activity in the summer and extend your bloom period through fall.

Elizabeth Craig is a co-founder of the Pollinator Pathway northeast region and serves on its Steering Committee. She also serves as chair of the Wilton, CT Inland Wetlands Commission, is a member of the Wilton Garden Club Conservation Committee, is a master gardener and an arborist.