

# Conservation Corner

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Last week I ended with Aesop's Fable of the Fox and the Grapes. In contemplating life's sour grapes, I was reminded of an out-of-state family wedding in July of 2004. It was summertime and peak fruit season in the San Joaquin Valley of central California. Never before or after have we enjoyed such mouth-watering peaches, plums, melons and, of course, grapes. They looked like our grapes, felt like our grapes, but tasted nothing like our grapes. We still remember Dan & Laura's wedding – oven-like heat, scenic King's Canyon, and the best fruit we've ever tasted.

It is that unforgettable fruit that leads us to this year's NRCS Poster Contest theme: Local Heroes – Your Hardworking Pollinators. Did you know that 1 in every 3 bites we eat or drink requires a pollinator? If you start to think about what you ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, then you will start to understand the importance of pollinators. Major crops here in the U.S. that depend on pollinators include alfalfa, apples, almonds, berries, canola, soybeans, and cotton. While we wouldn't starve to death, after all grains are wind pollinated, our diet would certainly lack color, flavor, and variety.

Simply stated, pollinators are essential to the world as we know it and as we eat it. Bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, moths, wasps, flies, beetles, and even a few mammals and reptiles are some of the many animals that enable flowers to produce seeds by transferring pollen from anther to stigma. By far insects, led by the bees, are the most important group of pollinators. And while honeybees are especially important in crop production, over 4,000 species of native bees play a crucial role in keeping our ecosystem up and running.

Pollinators are a keystone species group. In other words, a large number of other species depend upon them for survival. They are essential to the reproductive cycles of most flowering plants – plants that animals ranging from songbirds to grizzly bears rely on for food and shelter. Pollinators are also indicator species. In other words, the viability and health of our pollinators provide a snapshot of the health of our ecosystem.

Unfortunately, it's not a pretty picture. Like many good things, pollinators are in peril. Fortunately, there are simple things we can all do to help. Protect, enhance, and provide habitat with abundant nectar and pollen sources throughout the growing season. Don't forget to include host plants for the caterpillar stage. Strive for a garden with many flower colors, shapes, and bloom times. Leave some open sandy ground, brush piles, and old tree stumps for nesting and egg-laying habitat. As always, use pesticides sparingly and carefully.

Pollination that results in the manufacture of seeds is yet another of nature's miracles that we often overlook and take for granted. Next week we'll take a closer look at one of the most important and often overlooked pollinator of our native plants and crops – the humble bumblebee.



USDA Poster: Our Future Flies on the Wings of Pollinators