

Save the Pollinators, Save the World

Have you noticed fewer birds, bees, butterflies, moths and insects in general? I used to be forced to periodically scrape dead bugs off of my car's windshield; now I can't remember the last time I did it. When I heard about a free lecture, to be held on September 23 at Blackburn College, on the subject of pollinators, I felt compelled to attend. It got my full attention and two days later I found myself at the first official Bee City USA-Carlinville meeting.

Carlinville is also a Tree City, Blackburn is both a Tree Campus and a Bee Campus. All four groups are closely affiliated with a fifth committee, Make Carlinville Beautiful. Several members of our group are also members of one or more of these other committees.

There were some hoops to jump through. An application had to be filled out and a resolution written, both of which needed to be filed with Xerces, along with an application fee. Xerces is a science-based, international, nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting wildlife through the conservation of invertebrates. Check out their website at Xerces.org.

The resolution had to address several issues. A committee had to be formed to advocate for pollinators. Ours was formed on September 25 and we've met monthly, with the exception of December. We had to promise to publicly acknowledge Bee City USA-Carlinville with public signs and an on-line presence. We have to create and enhance pollinator habitat on public lands and some private properties, as well. This will be done by increasing the number of native plants and reducing the use of pesticides. This needs to be incorporated into both city and county maintenance plans. We are also required to host a public event, at least annually.

No time was wasted. After getting full support from the city, everything was sent to Xerces and, on October 8, Carlinville became the first, and remains the only, Bee City USA affiliate in Illinois. There are currently 104 Bee Cities in the country; the first in the nation was Asheville, North Carolina. Blackburn is 1 of 90 Bee Campuses in the United States and Carlinville is the only city in the country to have both affiliations.

Our website went live in November and, as of our February meeting, we had over 1000 hits at Carlinvillebees.org. We also have a Facebook page, Carlinville Bees, which had 459 Followers at last count. We plan to install "Bee City USA" signs at the four major entrances into Carlinville.

Pollinator-friendly gardens have been created at the train station and at City Hall. Signs will be erected at those locations stating that it's a Pollinator Area. There are another 17 sites within the city limits that are in various stages of becoming complete pollinator gardens.

We have a sub-committee to address the issue of pesticides. They are gathering information from the city and Macoupin County regarding what is currently being used and will recommend non-toxic alternatives.

Bee City and Tree City committee members teamed up for the annual Rotary Club Halloween Parade. They walked the route, handing out Bit O' Honey candy and packets of Bee-friendly seeds, courtesy of Blackburn College from their pollinator gardens. Two of our members put together a "Bee Basket" to be auctioned off at the upcoming Macoupin Scholarship event.

We've heard devastating news about bees being transported across the country to California. They don't have enough bees to pollinate the almond groves, due to the over-use of pesticides. We've heard that some farm supply stores are selling bees on-line, a bad idea. Bees do best in their native habitat and don't adjust well to being uprooted and moved.

I'm planning to convert a portion of my yard into a pollinator-friendly garden. Some of my plants are native, most of them aren't. It isn't easy to get rid of alien plants. They thrive because their natural predators aren't here. It would take our native insects hundreds of years to adapt enough to be able to feed on them. I've seen bees in the flowers of my hostas and lillies, neither of which is native. It's comparable to drinking a soda. It may taste good, but it's not beneficial in any way.

I planted two yellow milkweeds (a necessity for Monarchs) in my front garden last summer.

They are native to Mexico so they were started indoors from harvested seeds. Almost every day, I checked for caterpillars; I never did see any. One morning, I suddenly had a young butterfly. He stayed close for several weeks and once in awhile another one would stop by for a visit. I was sad when he left, but I harvested the seeds and will be planting more.

It isn't feasible to rip out all of my aliens at once. I managed to dig up two hostas last fall and have ordered seeds to start natives. Once they're established, they should maintain themselves.

Thriving pollinators are essential to the health of the planet and to life itself. Eighty-five to ninety percent of our flowering plants depend on pollination to reproduce. One out of every three bites you eat is courtesy of bee pollination. Save the pollinators, save the world.