

# Powerful pollinators

Encouraging insect pollinators in urban environments & gardens



Pollinators are an essential component of our cities and suburbs. Enhancing pollinator resources to support a diverse range of beneficial insects is important for flourishing gardens, sustainable backyards, healthy green spaces, and thriving ecosystems. The Powerful Pollinators Guide provides an introduction to encouraging insect pollinators in the south-eastern suburbs and surrounds of urban Melbourne.

# The power of pollinators

Pollinators – mostly insects, but also birds and mammals – assist the production of seeds and fruit in many plant species by visiting flowers in search of food (nectar and/or pollen). Whilst foraging they transfer pollen from one flower to another, facilitating fertilisation, which results in fruits and seeds.

Honey bees, native bees and other native insects like hoverflies, wasps and butterflies provide essential pollination services for native plants, garden flowers, fruits and vegetables.

## Pollinators and food security

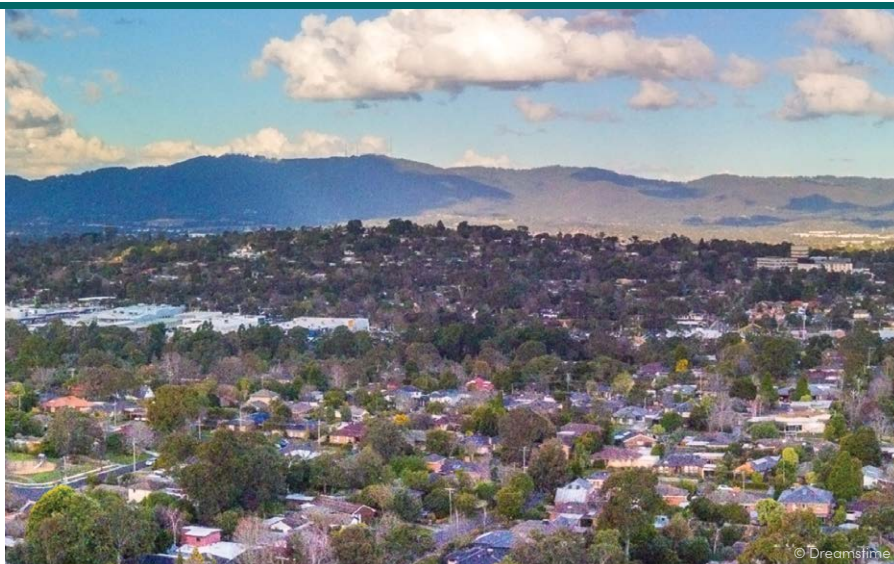
Without insect pollinators, the quantity and diversity of food and plants grown in backyard gardens would be severely restricted. Many of the foods we eat, from gardens and farms, benefit from pollination.

Pollinator-dependent foods include citrus, apples, stone-fruit, zucchini, pumpkins, strawberries and tomatoes, as well as plants grown for seed such as sunflowers, coriander and parsley.

The quantity and diversity of insect pollinators are key drivers of production as they influence both food yields and quality. Under-pollination results in smaller and misshapen fruit or seed that isn't viable.

A diverse and healthy community of pollinators generally provides more effective and consistent pollination than relying on any single species.

Pollinators are essential to, and dependent upon, healthy ecosystems. A growing human population and increasing demand for food puts pressure on ecosystems, with potential negative impacts on biodiversity, the environment and food production.



Increasing the abundance and diversity of native plants in urban landscapes supports pollinators by providing a range of food sources and nesting sites.

Insect populations are in decline worldwide due to land clearing, intensive or monocultural agriculture, pesticide use, pollution, colony disease, increased urbanisation and climate change. Low pollinator numbers mean not all flowers are pollinated, leading to low fruit or seed set. This in turn reduces fruit and vegetable harvest yields, and decreases food supply.



Under-pollination results in smaller, misshapen fruit such as this strawberry.

## Backyard biodiversity

Insect pollinators are a prime example of the importance of healthy ecosystems in urban gardens, parks and reserves. Insects are the 'canaries in the coal mine' of our urban and rural environments. Without our 'littlest creatures', we lack pollinators, natural beneficial pest control services, and critical food source for other insects, birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals.

The presence of connected and widespread pollinator habitat is critical to support insect populations if we are to maintain sustainable cities and productive, healthy gardens and urban farms for food security and biodiversity.

Pollinators require habitat that contains year-round food sources, breeding resources and nesting sites. The presence of pollinator habitat adjacent to food crops has been shown to improve food production by enabling a greater variety and number of pollinators to persist year-round, providing pollination services when required.

**Turn to the centre of this brochure for a guide to planting for pollinators.**

## Diapause or diet? Where are the insects?

Many insect pollinators undergo a diapause during colder winter months. Diapause is a period of suspended development during unfavourable environmental conditions, and during

this period insect pollinators do not need flowers. Birds and other small mammals will continue to benefit from available pollen and nectar during this time.

If there are low numbers of insect pollinators in your local area, it is important to determine whether this is because of diapause, or because of an inadequate availability of nectar and

pollen creating a 'food desert' where insect pollinators cannot survive.

There are still many unknowns about insect pollinators in Australia. Take part in Australian Pollinator Week or in the annual Australian Pollinator Count to learn more about pollinators in your area – visit:

**[AustralianPollinatorWeek.org.au](http://AustralianPollinatorWeek.org.au)** and **[AustralianPollinatorCount.au](http://AustralianPollinatorCount.au)**

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# Encouraging pollinators in your garden

## Create pollination reservoirs

Pollination reservoirs are areas that provide floral resources for pollinators. They can be gardens, new plantings or existing habitat such as established trees, or even local bushland, parks or reserves. A high diversity of plant species is essential to provide nectar, pollen and nesting sites throughout the year. Pollination reservoirs need to be close enough to where pollinators live to ensure that they can fly easily to them.

## Improve on what you have

Enhance and improve existing pollinator habitat where possible. Gardens that already contain elements such as large trees, rockeries, water sources, bare soil and organic matter, and a variety of flowering plants are a valuable resource for beneficial insects and pollinators.

Nature-strips and verges, ponds, vegetable gardens, orchards, bushland, grassland, and river and creek edges can all be important pollinator-attracting areas. Protect and enhance any native pollinator plants in your garden or on your property for the future.

## Plant trees, shrubs and groundcovers

Planting a variety of species of groundcovers, shrubs and trees in your garden will further attract pollinators to your patch. Initial watering and protection will improve the success rate of young plants. Wildflowers, including our native pea species, are excellent at attracting a diverse range of native pollinators.

Be a citizen scientist and do some detective work to discover local pollinators in your patch. Visit [inaturalist.ala.org.au](http://inaturalist.ala.org.au) to be involved.

## Construct insect real estate

Insect hotels, which are both functional and attractive, are a great way to add to habitat and nesting places for pollinators and insects in your backyard or garden. The hotels are easily moved to be close to flowering plants and those needing pollination, especially if you have a new garden that is still growing. Include lots of different sized holes, cracks and crevices to provide homes for various solitary insect pollinators.

## Plant for the future

When establishing pollinator habitat, consider including species that are indigenous to your area but can tolerate increasingly drier and warmer conditions, to create resilient habitat for climate change. Rehabilitate weedy areas into managed pollination reservoirs by introducing lots of flowering plant diversity. Be careful not to plant invasive or listed weeds, and look for suitable replacements.

## Amplify the flower signal

Plants have evolved large flowers or clusters of smaller flowers because they attract more pollinator visits. Large, colourful and diverse plantings attract more pollinators. Ideally, plant in groups that contain different vegetation layers – combine a species-rich mixture of wildflowers, ground-covers, herbs, lilies, rushes, climbers, shrubs and trees.

## Connectivity counts

Insect pollinators benefit from greater connectivity of habitat in a landscape, which allows them to forage over a wider radius and increase in numbers in a local area. Encourage friends and neighbours to plant for pollinators and create connections in your community.

## Get to know your local flora

Your local government area has distinct populations of insects, depending on the local flora and environment. Knowing your local insect species will help you develop better plantings.

The plants growing in nearby nature reserves or bushland will be suited to your climate and soils. Local environment groups and specialist native nurseries can provide information about local plants.

## Grow a bumper crop

Pollinator-attracting plants include many fruits and vegetables grown in backyards, community and market gardens, and orchards. Pollinators ensure good yields of crops such as apples, beans, avocado, and almonds, and bush foods such as lilly-pilly and yam daisy.

## Reduce chemical use

Insecticides, fungicides and herbicides all affect bee, colony and wild pollinator health. Herbicides can impact pollinators by reducing the availability and diversity of flora and removing vegetation that helps support insect life. Some herbicides can also harm the beneficial microbes in the insect gut. Insecticides are an obvious threat to pollinators, yet many beneficial insects will, in healthy numbers, help control pest insects, ultimately reducing the need for insecticide use.

Many crops are dependent on pollination by bees. When chemical pest control is unavoidable, select products that are least harmful for pollinators and apply insecticides in the evening or at night when pollinators are not active. Always use according to directions, especially for withholding periods, and notify beekeepers a few days before spraying chemicals so beehives can be safely relocated away from harm.

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**Safeguard the bees?** The best way to ‘save the bees’ and protect our pollinators is to create an abundance of diverse habitat – from the ground up! There is much interest in keeping a bee hive to promote pollinators, but there are serious legal and biosecurity responsibilities that must be considered, and that the introduction of a bee hive does not displace existing native pollinators and insects. Be a friend of pollinators and say it with flowers!

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## Know your pollinators



European honey bee  
(*Apis mellifera*)

© iStock

**European honey bees** have two pairs of wings and long, segmented antennae. They are daytime-flying and feed on nectar and pollen. They are generalist pollinators and provide the bulk of pollination services for horticulture and crop plants. Honey bees and native bees are both essential to functioning ecosystems and food security in Australia.

Honey bees have become an important part of the Australian landscape. Honey bees live as colonies, and have a long history of coexistence with humans, including in domestic gardens.



Leafcutter bee  
(*Megachile maculariformis*)

© Karen Retra

**Australian native bees** comprise more than 2000 species, which provide essential pollination services. Native bees are generally solitary and live in nests in the ground or in hollow stems, old borer holes and other cracks and crevices, and some have evolved to pollinate particular native flowers through 'buzz pollination'. Although many Australian native bees are generalist foragers, some species have co-evolved with native plants and adapted to be the most effective pollinators of their flowers. Many native plant species, such as *Dianella* and *Grevillea* require specially adapted insects to access their nectar and enable the transfer of pollen to the stigma. Most native bees are solitary, but some species found in northern Australia (*Tetragonula* sp. and *Austroplebeia* sp.) are social bees and are used for commercial pollination of crops like macadamia nuts.



Bee fly  
(Family Bombyliidae)

© Karen Retra

**Fly** species number up to 30,000 in Australia, and can be identified by having only one pair of flight wings. A second set of wings are modified into club-shaped paddles that allow flies to hover and stabilise their flight. Unlike bees and wasps, many flies (Brachycera) have very small, clubbed antennae at the front of their head. Flies, including blowflies, are often attracted to flowers that smell like carrion. Some flower-flies, have hairy bodies that easily collect pollen while they are feeding. Flies provide a range of services in the garden, including pollination, decomposition and predation.



Hoverfly  
(Family Syrphidae)

© Karen Retra

**Hoverflies** are a type of fly, distinguishable by their large eyes, short antennae, bright black and yellow abdomen and their hovering flight behaviour. Adult hoverflies are nectar and pollen feeders. Hoverfly larvae feed on pests such as aphids, thrips and leafhoppers and are excellent biocontrol agents.



Fiddler Beetle  
(*Eupoecila australasiae*)

© Erica Siegel

**Beetles** have hard outer wings that form their distinctive beetle shape. Their outer wings form a T-shape where they join at the top, unlike bugs where the outer wings make an X- or Y-shape. Some beetles feed on nectar and pollen, usually by crawling over flower surfaces. There are around 30,000 species of beetles in Australia, with many yet to be formally described.



Meadow argus  
(*Junonia villida*)

© J. Hort

**Butterflies** have wings covered in tiny scales. They have clubbed antennae and hold their wings upright when at rest. They are day-flying and have long tongues that they can use to feed on nectar in flowers with deep tubes. Butterflies are usually brightly coloured, with approximately 600 species found in Australia.



Beautiful leaf moth  
(*Gastrophora henricaria*)

© Karen Retra

**Moths** also have wings covered in tiny scales and tend to be subtle in colour. They have antennae without clubs and hold their wings flat when at rest. They are generally dusk- and night-flying but there are some exceptions: the grapevine moth is a commonly seen day-flying moth. Moths feed on nectar. Australia has a high diversity of moth species, with up to 22,000 species thought to exist across the continent.

## Flower forms



© Meredith Cosgrove

**Generalist flowers** can be pollinated by many different insects and animals. They are typically saucer shaped with many stamens and have a surface that insects can walk on. *Eucalyptus* flowers and daisy flowers are generalist flowers – they can be pollinated by bees, flies, beetles and butterflies.



© Meredith Cosgrove

**Specialist flowers** have modifications to their shape and size that only let certain pollinators access the nectar and pollen. These flowers might have deep flower tubes or narrow entry points so that only a select group of pollinators can access them. The advantage of specialisation is that pollination is very targeted and efficient, with accurate pollen placement made possible by co-evolution between flowers and insects. The disadvantage is that if the correct pollinator isn't there, the flowers aren't pollinated. Often, nectar is produced at the base of the flower, forcing pollinators to enter the flower fully and in the process, become covered in pollen.

## Pollinator rewards

**Nectar** is a sugary solution, rich in carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, produced by flowers and sometimes by glands on leaves or stems (called extra-floral nectaries). Nectar is attractive to insects, and provides an immediate energy source needed for tasks such as hunting pest insects, laying eggs in decomposing organic matter, collecting pollen, or parasitising other insects.

Carbohydrates alone don't support everything needed for health and growth, so insects also need pollen.

**Pollen** is rich in protein, fats and nutrients. Bees are vegetarian, and need to collect pollen to feed their offspring.

## Buzz pollination

Some flowers do not produce any nectar; they specifically target pollen-collecting bees, and only offer pollen rewards. To limit pollen loss and ensure effective pollination, some plants produce flowers with specialised, tubular anthers, that only open at the tip. To extract pollen, bees use vibrations to 'buzz' the pollen grains out of the pores of these anthers. Many crops are buzz pollinated, including tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants, capsicum, chillies, tomatillo and cranberries.

European honey bees are unable to buzz pollinate flowers, but several native bees, such as the blue-banded bee, teddy bear bee (*Amegilla* sp.) and carpenter bee (*Xylocopa* sp.) are exceptionally good large buzz pollinators, and have evolved to pollinate native plants such as flax lilies (*Dianella* sp.). Many of our smaller, ground nesting bees utilise vibration to help them excavate their burrows, and they also

use that skill to buzz pollen from the anthers of native plants.

Planting buzz-pollinated species will encourage populations of buzz pollinators for successful pollination of food crops and ensure seed set in native plants. Many small ground nesting bees also buzz pollinate native flowers.

## Nectar feeding

Grevillea flowers and other tubular flowers are often adapted to be successfully pollinated by birds. Pollen is 'presented' on a floral stigma that extends outside the flower. When birds feed on the nectar, pollen is deposited on their beaks or heads. Bees, also attracted to the sugary nectar, crawl into the side of the flower and feed on the nectar without encountering the pollen-laden stigma. The plant doesn't receive the pollination benefit from the insect, but flowers such Grevillea species can be a very useful source of nectar for insects in the cooler months.

## Nurseries

Most of the plants shown in the planting guide will be available at nurseries that have a good stock of native plants. But if your local nursery doesn't stock the plant you're after, ask them to order it in. For a list of nurseries that stock all the plants shown in the planting guide, plus other useful resources, visit the When Bee Foundation website or scan the QR code.



[WhenBeeFoundation.org.au/our-work/powerful-pollinators](https://WhenBeeFoundation.org.au/our-work/powerful-pollinators)

## When Bee Foundation

Powerful Pollinators Planting Guides are produced by When Bee Foundation. We fund vital strategic research and education initiatives that strengthen bees, improve pollination efficiency, and protect our food security and ecosystem health. Visit the website for more information.

[WhenBeeFoundation.org.au](https://WhenBeeFoundation.org.au)

**Far left:** The spreading flax lily, *Dianella revoluta*, is buzz pollinated.

**Left:** This European honey bee is 'side-working': feeding on the nectar-rich flowers without coming into contact with the plant's pollen.

### Front cover:

1. Australian native bee, *Lipotriches* species. (Photo: Erica Siegel)
2. Aerial view over of south-eastern Melbourne suburbs. (Photo: Dreamstime)
3. European honey bees, *Apis mellifera*. (Photo: Kirrily Hughes)



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