

A Pollinator-Friendly Garden in Rural Courtenay

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We respectfully acknowledge that land on which we garden is the Unceded Traditional Territory of the **K'ómoks First Nation**, the traditional keepers of the land.

In the rural farmland just outside downtown Courtenay, BC, is Leslie's home. And thanks to Leslie, countless pollinators and other wildlife find a comfortable home there too. A former bee-keeper, Leslie lets [our ecoregion's pollinators](#) underpin the design, maintenance, and the ethos of her garden by "creating the conditions to invite them to come," as Leslie describes.



Left: Just two years from its inception, the garden is already filling in with pollinator-friendly species. A deer fence keeps those roaming ruminants away from the garden buffet.



Right: A bee feasts on a bloom of a hardy geranium which has a simple single petal structure, allowing pollinators easy access to the nectar within.

With bees being a major 'buzz'-word right now, many savvy gardeners can list flowers in their garden that provide certain bee species with their nectar needs, maybe even in succession across the year. However, not all gardeners think beyond a pollinator's food needs. Like humans, bees and other pollinators need more than food to live and thrive in their environment, so it is equally important to take *habitat* into consideration when creating a pollinator-friendly garden. The Pollinator Partnership of Canada's guide to

choosing plants for our ecoregion of Eastern Vancouver Island introduces our native bees and other pollinators (butterflies, moths, beetles, flies, hummingbirds and bats) and their needs at all stages of life. These needs include:

- Cover and winter protection
- Access to nesting sites and materials
- Food for adult pollinators as well as young
- A safe and consistent source of water

Leslie made the decision to put pollinators first in her garden design when she moved to her new home outside Courtenay. She brought knowledge to this new garden project from five years of bee-keeping as well as a course for ‘Pollinator Steward Certification’ under her belt from the Pollinator Partnership of Canada. With the support of local landscape designer Arianne Heune and a lot of research, Leslie created a garden that is not only a pollinator-friendly habitat, but also a splendid environment for the gardener and her family. Leslie finds herself in a child-like state of awe just watching the insects “do what they do” in her garden. Additionally, her small orchard will benefit from having a healthy and robust population of pollinators ready to do their work when the trees bloom in the spring. That being said, the features of her garden that welcome insects are equally beautiful to the human eye; Leslie’s thoughtfully curated plant list was intended to be beautiful as well as practical.

The Comox Valley gardener included a selection of plants and trees native to our region, as well as a number of non-native species that extend the foraging season for pollinators, such as oakleaf hydrangea (more pollinator-friendly than other hydrangea varieties), hardy geranium, sedums, monarda, rudbeckia, and echinacea. Though in August of 2022 the garden was only two years old, it was already a resounding success, both in its serene beauty, and in that it was absolutely smothered in pollinators.

A NOTE ABOUT FOOD FOR POLLINATORS

Forage for pollinators is more than just nectar and pollen! For example, adult butterflies will also eat fermenting fallen fruit, so they will thank you for a little untidiness!

While flowers are a feast for adult pollinators, it is important to think about supporting pollinators at all life stages and include plants in the garden that pollinator larvae (e.g. caterpillars) can eat.

Some plants are considered **host plants** if they provide a place for pollinators to lay their eggs and a source of food and shelter to the developing larvae. For example, a commonly known host plant is milkweed for caterpillars destined to become beautiful Monarch butterflies.



Left: A bumblebee on a blue beard (*Caryopteris Caryopteris x clandonensis* 'Beyond Midnight')

Middle: A fly (lesser thought-of pollinator) on a Japanese anemone 'Honorine Jobert'

Right: A bee on a Sedum 'Autumn Joy'



Above: Every garden is a work in progress. A redbud tree awaits its perfect planting spot.

Beyond her plant list alone, Leslie's overall garden landscape also keeps pollinators in mind. The planting choices provide height variation, which mimics the natural layers of a forest and provides protection and cover, as well as open spaces that mimic a meadow, and running water.

Standout features of the garden were the existing big-leaf maples (*Acer macrophyllum*) that tower above the garden, moss covered and majestic, and contributing to the canopy layer. Big-leaf maples support bees by offering an early source of pollen and nectar. Our native maples also support pollinating flies and beetles, in addition to acting as a “host” plant for pollinating insects’ eggs and larvae. Smaller trees such as dogwood and redbud will be planted to form the lower tree layer. Serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) attracts bees and pollinating flies and functions as a pollinator host plant. In the shrub layer, salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis*) brings bees and salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) supports bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds, while also holding up well to summer drought. In the herbaceous layer, pacific bleeding heart (*Dicentra formosa*) attracts hummingbirds, sword ferns (*Polystichum minimum*) offer cover and grow well in shade. Many of Leslie’s sun-loving herbaceous perennials are planted in large drifts, which supports pollinators’ efficiency. The insects can get into a good groove if they are accessing the same types of flowers repeatedly, not to mention they bring the right pollen to the right flower when visiting the same species in sequence.



Upper Right: A moss-covered big-leaf maple provides shade to the gardener as well as food and habitat to native pollinator species.

Left: A rain swale is planted with *Carex obnuta*. Behind are echinacea and monarda, both non-native pollinator staples. Further back is a tranquil seating area.

Right: A fallen maple leaf rests on the bubbling rock feature, where insects and birds can access clean and shallow drinking water.

Leslie also leaves patches of bare soil that receive some sunlight, which can provide a niche for ground-nesting bees to make themselves a safe haven. She leaves perennial plants to die back over winter, providing much-needed cover for pollinators that nest in stems

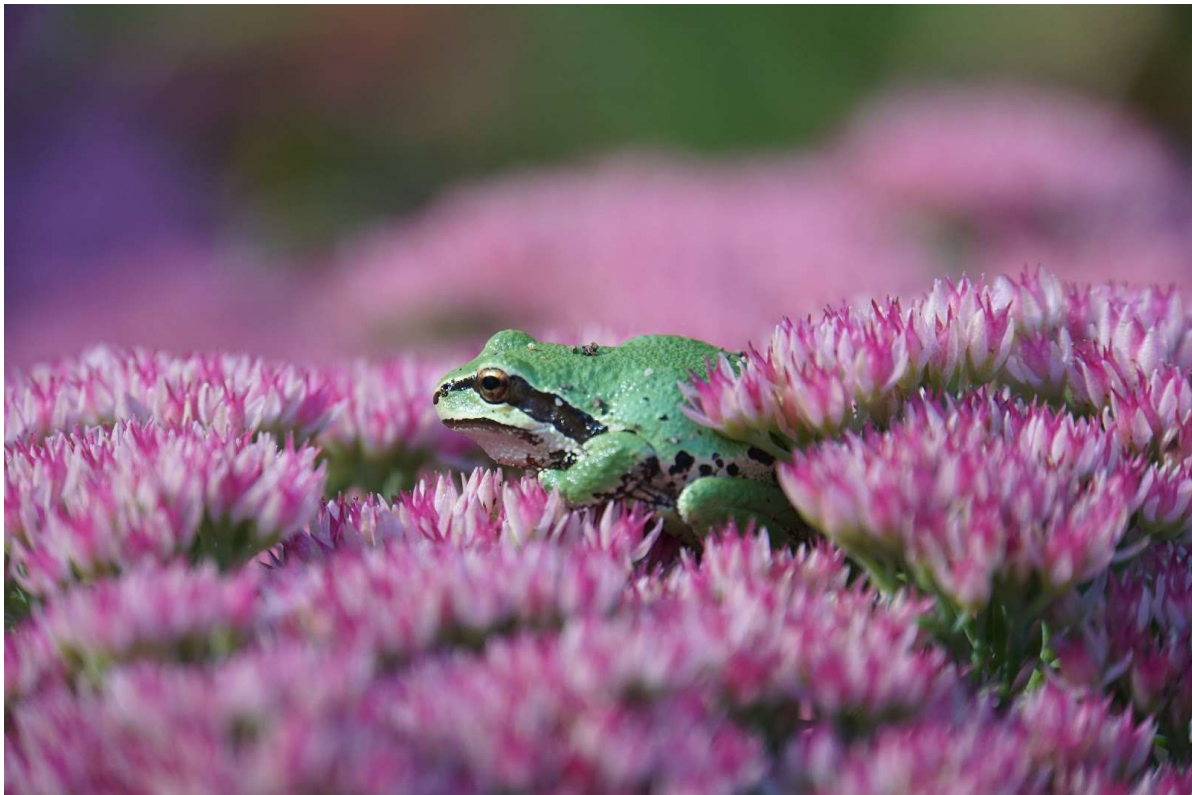
A NOTE ABOUT BARE SOIL

As opposed to bark mulch, an organic compost can offer the same water-retaining and soil-amending effect while remaining habitable for ground-nesting bees.

during the cold winter season. A bubbling rock water feature provides a source of fresh water shallow enough that insects will not drown. Any water that splashes off the feature onto the soil can also provide mason bees with a source of moist soil to create their nests - not to mention creating a soothing and peaceful atmosphere for the gardener who hears the water splashing onto stone.

The wildlife features of Leslie's garden by no means detract from its human elements. When wandering around Leslie's space, one finds several paved seating areas for dining and relaxing at different points of the day, beautiful rock features, seasonal interest, a rain swale for storm-water infiltration, and most importantly, that feeling of seclusion and serenity that comes from a garden that sits naturally in its rural landscape.

At first glance, Leslie's garden is simply beautiful. Only when you get down on hands and knees (as the gardener or garden-enthusiast is wont to), do you spot the wildlife that has indeed come at Leslie's invitation - including a Pacific Tree Frog. Only on reflection does this writer realize that there were few or none of the blousy double blooms that tend to catch our eyes when shopping in the nursery, as Leslie's planting choices favour varieties with single blooms that are more accessible to pollinators. This Comox Valley pollinator garden offers a calm and contemplative space that quietly supports local wildlife without sacrificing beauty. The gardener and her family will enjoy the fruits of their labour in years to come in the form of a bountiful harvests of orchard fruits as the trees matures, in part due to the way they nurture the insect species that sustain us all in the Comox Valley. *



Above: A Pacific Tree Frog the gardener has fondly dubbed "Ralph" perching on the umbels of Sedum 'Autumn Joy'

Do you have fruit trees?

Here are some considerations for supporting pollinators that can increase your yield:

- Apple trees and other fruit trees are often pollinated by mason bees.
- Mason bees are most active in the spring from March until June.
- Unlike many other bees, they aren't necessarily fair-weather fliers! Mason bees are able to fly in light rain, which makes them important pollinators for spring blooms in our region given our rainy spring weather.
- Mason bees are solitary. Solitary bees are not aggressive.
- They are cavity-dwelling bees. They nest in deadwood existing tunnels in left by beetles, hollow pithy stems (such as raspberry canes), or in man-made nesting holes such as those offered by bee hotels.
- Mason bees will plug up the ends of the holes with mud, so having some moist soil available will support their nesting needs.
- Mason bees only travel a short distance from their nests to forage, so they benefit from a good selection of flowers across their active foraging season of March to June. In addition to fruit tree blooms, Mason bees forage on dandelions and Oregon grape (Mahonia).



Above: Apple blossoms

A NOTE ABOUT BEE HOTELS

Not all bee-hotels are made equal. Check out the link below 'Welcome Mason Bees to Your Yard' from the Pollinator Partnership of Canada for more information on how to make, site, and maintain a bee-hotel.

Want to learn more?

Online resources used in the creation of this post:

- Pollinator Partnership of Canada
 - [Selecting Plants for Pollinators: A Guide for Gardeners, Farmers, and Land Managers in the Eastern Vancouver Island Planting Region](#)
 - [Welcoming Mason Bees to Your Yard](#)
- British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture
 - [Blue Orchard Mason Bee *Osmia Lignaria*](#)
- Oregon State University Extension Service

- [Nurturing Mason Bees in Your Backyard in Western Oregon](#)
- Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation
 - [Nesting Resources](#)

Interested in becoming a pollinator steward?

<https://pollinatorpartnership.ca/en/pollinator-steward-certification>

Key words:

Pollinators, bees, hummingbirds, butterflies, pacific northwest, native plants, Comox Valley, gardening, pollinator-friendly gardens, Vancouver Island, garden design