

A Disappearing Act: Bees and Butterflies
Submitted by the North Oaks Natural Resources Commission

Honeybees and monarch butterflies could use your help. You have probably heard that bee populations are shrinking to dangerously low levels. You might also be aware that scientists have noticed a disturbing downward trend in the number of monarch butterflies migrating to Mexico. So what's going on?

The Honeybees

An estimated 10 million beehives have been wiped out over the past six years. Scientists have been searching for the cause of the puzzling Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), where the majority of bees in a hive die at once. Suspected causes include pesticides, parasites, gut fungi, viruses, bacteria, and poor nutrition. Most likely, CCD is caused by multiple factors - a "perfect storm" of environmental stresses.

The Monarchs

There are three major reasons that monarch numbers are declining. Severe weather, including drought and cold temperatures, over the past few years has negatively impacted monarch numbers. Illegal deforestation in the monarch wintering grounds in Mexico is another factor. Perhaps the largest problem is the widespread use of herbicides, which kills milkweed (eggs are laid on the leaves, and caterpillars eat the plant) and sources of nectar (for the adults).

Why You Should Care...

...about the honeybees: The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that one-third of all food and beverages consumed in the U.S. are dependent on pollination by bees, with crops such as almonds and squash most heavily relying on bees to produce seeds.

...about the monarchs: The monarch may be the canary in the coal mine warning us that things are going wrong in our environment, they are pleasing to watch, and they are used to teach children about the biology of life cycles and migration.

There is hope! You can help!

One of our very own Minnesota companies is making an effort to help bees and butterflies. In early March, Bachman's announced that it has gone neonic free. Neonicotinoids are the systemic insecticides that are expressed in every cell of a plant and in its nectar and pollen. They've been widely credited as one of the many problems challenging pollinators. "We've decided to eliminate neonics," Bachman said. "In all our production operations, in the plants we produce, in nursery stock and outdoor plants, in any plants which are out and available for pollinators."

There are simple things you can do to help as well:

- Plant pollinator-friendly plants in your garden (flowering plants, vegetables, herbs, and milkweed). The North Oaks Garden Club is a good source for helping you pick out specific plants. You might also visit www.beelab.umn.edu and click on "Plants for Minnesota Bees" on the right side of the page.
- Provide bee and butterfly habitat
- Do not use pesticides during mid-day hours, when honeybees and monarchs are out searching for nectar and pollen.
- Better yet, avoid using pesticides entirely. Leave clover and dandelions in your yard, as they are a haven for bees.
- One way to safely control some insect pests without killing pollinators is by using products like Surround (with kaolin clay) on fruit and vegetable plants.
- Write to your Federal senators and representatives and ask them to support funding of honeybee and monarch butterfly research.
- Join Monarch Watch (www.monarchwatch.org)
- Support local beekeepers (www.mnbeekeepers.com)