

Herbs for Pollinators

by Holly Kocet

An herb is defined as an annual, biennial, or perennial with leaves, seeds, or flowers valued for their medicinal, savory, or aromatic qualities. As a rule, these plants do not develop persistent woody tissue but die down at the end of a growing season.



Coneflower (Echinacea) has traditionally been valued by indigenous peoples for its medicinal properties.

This definition falls short when you consider that some plants with woody stems also have properties consistent with herbal uses. These include lavender, rosemary and bayberry (*Morella caroliniensis*). Our native witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), a tree that blooms in the fall for late-season pollinators, also has medicinal properties. An extract derived from its leaves is a potent antioxidant and a soothing astringent for many skin ailments.

Historical Uses of Herbs

Early colonists brought many herbs to the Americas from their homelands. Plants such as basil, parsley and thyme were valued as much then as they are today for flavoring soups, sauces and meats. Many of these introduced herbs were staples of the colonial kitchen. Plants like catmint and chamomile were used to make relaxing teas and to calm stomach ailments. Lavender repelled moths and made a fragrant potpourri. This shrub has attractive blue-green aromatic foliage and fragrant flowers still used in sachets. Oils derived from its flowers are used in many products from scented candles to soaps.



Anise Hyssop is a native pollinator magnet which also has culinary and medicinal properties. Native Americans even believed that the sweet smell of hyssop could treat depression!

Many of our native plants are also considered herbs

and they were valued by indigenous peoples long before the arrival of European colonists. Native Americans used Coneflower (Echinacea) for a variety of ailments including cough, colds, inflammation, pain management, and even snake bites. Goldenrod (Solidago) was also used for medicinal purposes. Leaves were used as a styptic to stop bleeding and a tea made from the flowers was helpful in reducing fever and relieving sore throats. Even today, many herbs are promoted for benefits ranging from stress relief to providing antioxidants for immune health. No question herbs have an important place in our day-to-day lives.

Benefits to Pollinators

But what is really so special about herbs is their benefit to our bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. As with native plants, herbs in our gardens help to support biodiversity. They feed many of our native bees, large and small - bees with long tongues and short tongues, bees that nest in the ground and those that nest in tree cavities, forbs or canes. **Many herbs support specialist bees** that only forage on plants in a particular plant family and are critical to their survival. Several herbs also attract butterflies and moths.

While plants native to our area are generally considered best for our pollinators and other wildlife, having co-evolved over hundreds of thousands of years for mutual benefit, some introduced herbs do attract our native pollinators in a big way. Dill, along with other plants in the carrot family (parsley and fennel), is a host plant for the Black Swallowtail butterfly caterpillar. These plants are closely related to Golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*) which is the native host plant for this caterpillar. And these herbs that attract beneficial insects such as lady beetles and lacewings for natural pest control are enormously valuable to any garden.



Black swallowtail caterpillar on fennel.

Eminent biologist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author, decorated for his tireless work in promoting conservation and biodiversity,

Edward O. Wilson understood that insects play many essential ecological roles in sustaining Earth's ecosystems. Of course, planting to support these beneficial insects is hugely important. Whether planting herbs among other valuable garden plants or selecting a specific area for an herb garden, it is satisfying to know your garden is alive with a flurry of activity for the critters E. O. Wilson called "the little things that run the world".



The small flowers of herbs like fennel attract pollinators as well as beneficial insects which control pests in the garden. Left: Native bee. Right: Solitary wasp.

All photos: Karalyn Lamb