



The Birds and the Bees, and the Bugs

April—when spring really starts! Even after the mildest of winters, we're grateful for the softness in the air, the songs of birds and the newly awakened frogs. March's muddiness has dried out (I hope; I'm writing this three weeks before you'll read it) and it's time for spring planting. This spring, more than ever, it's vital that we all make native plants the focus of our gardens.

Why? Very simply, because native bees, insects, butterflies and moths depend on them for food. Many people have heard that the beautiful monarch butterfly caterpillars can only eat milkweed, but they don't realize that there are many other creatures dependent on a particular plant family. Bugs evolved together with plants, and they can't simply move over to the latest fancy imported flower. Your yard may be a showcase of gorgeous shrubs, annuals and perennials, but if they're not native, it's a desert. Moreover, some of these creatures, especially bees, need [something in bloom all season long](#), from the first warm March days until the cold returns.

Many of these bugs are small, humble, grey or brown beings, not flashy like the monarch, but their young are the ONLY food for baby birds. No bugs or caterpillars, no birds. And they're taking a beating: from climate change; from habitat loss; from pesticides and herbicides; and from the deaths of so many of our native trees. We need to do what we can to help them out. That doesn't mean sacrificing beauty: there are many colorful natives to choose from, and all are likely to be easier to care for than imports. For a list of suggestions, see this list of Best Wildflowers for Bees. Take the list with you to your favorite nursery. If enough of us ask, they will stock it.

One other, crucial step to take to protect insects and caterpillars: TURN THE LIGHTS OUT! Most night-flying insects and moths live for only a few weeks. That's all the time they have to find mates and produce the next generation. But if they spend the night circling your porch light, it's all over. Please, if you feel you must have one, at least put it on a timer. Better yet, install a motion sensor. It matters.

And need I add, avoid pesticides or herbicides. If you can't grow something without dousing it with poison, it doesn't belong here.

One flower in particular has special value for bees: the sunflower. Their pollen helps bees resist parasites and some diseases. Sunflowers are native to the Americas, easy to grow, and come in all sizes. And what's more cheerful than a row of bright yellow

sunflowers? If you want to grow yours from seed, be sure to choose varieties that produce pollen--many have been bred to be pollenless. Avoid those, and also avoid the very fluffy ones: even if these make pollen, nothing can get at it through all those petals. If you want to buy your plants already started, the Garden Club will have lots to choose from at the Tag Sale in May.

Sunflowers are a great way to introduce children to nature and gardens, because they grow so quickly and get so big. You could plant some of the really big varieties in a circle, to create a living playhouse. Or, imagine a child's excitement upon entering a plant in the special "biggest sunflower" class at the Haddam Neck Fair.

As I mentioned earlier, this column is written several weeks before publication. As I write, we are all facing a lot of unknowns. Whatever happens this spring, I urge all of you to take steps to:

--Keep tabs on your elderly neighbors, and make sure they have everything they need—and don't forget that loneliness is as debilitating as hunger. Bring along a garden bouquet.

--Every time you go shopping, be sure to buy a few extras for the food pantry. Our friends and neighbors need our help now more than ever.

--Go outside! Even if you're not a gardener, you can't help but feel happier and more optimistic when you walk through the woods or across the lawn, unplugged, listening to the breeze in the trees. Given half a chance, Nature unfailingly lifts our spirits. Right now, we all need that.