

Yens Pedersen, Bee educator and spokesman for the Regina District Bee Club

I do a lot of bee education and one of the challenges for the past several years is the vast amount of misinformation about bees, much of it coming from well-intentioned but uninformed places. I agree that we should not expect that dandelions alone will suffice to keep native bees alive and that native plants are preferable. From my observation, some of the people who think that they can let their yards go wild (with dandelions and other plants) thinking that they are 'helping the bees' are the same people who think they can get honeybees or import some other non-native bee (like alfalfa leafcutters or certain bumblebees) and that they are somehow helping the situation, which they are not.

I completely agree that dandelion is not native. That goes for most of the plants grown in gardens. It also goes for most of the agricultural crops that we grow. So, while I completely agree that native bees survived without dandelions pre-contact, that is no longer the scenario. The scenario faced by native bees (Saskatchewan has about 300 species, I don't know what there is in southern Ontario) is not a choice of pre-contact native landscape with no dandelions vs. today's landscape with dandelions and many other introduced species. What native bees care about is whether there is food and habitat available to them. The facts are that the flowers which bees go to is highly location specific (if the bees are generalists), many native bees choose dandelions, and that when dandelions first bloom there is a limited selection of flowers available. There are also many species of native bees which rely on a single plant (much like the monarch butterfly and milkweed relationship). If dandelions are reducing the number of those plants, then yes dandelions are hurting those particular species of bees. But each species of native bee has different needs. In some cases, dandelions are helping native bees, and, in some cases, native bees are surviving which would not survive without dandelions. Can some native bees survive without dandelions? Absolutely.

I'm a big fan of incorporating native plants into our yards, I can absolutely agree with your assertion that people who have messy, overgrown yards which spread dandelions might be doing harm in the long run by turning other people off. It is just incorrect and going too far to say this is harming bees. Our highly manipulated and completely non-native urban landscapes do provide some wonderful habitat to some native bee species, while other native bee species which are less adaptable have not done well. It's a much bigger issue than just dandelions though.

In many cases feeding a bee species only one type of pollen will not be positive, especially if that bee is a generalist, and even if that plant is native. There can be significant differences between the nutritional content of pollens from different flowers, and I suspect it varies a lot based on the soil as well. While a diet of straight dandelion pollen may not be good for certain bees, we should not assume that a diet incorporating dandelion pollen is unhealthy for bees. For example, while apples are generally considered to be good and healthy for humans, if we ate only apples, it would not be healthy.

Also, I would highly recommend the experience of simply sitting in the middle of a patch of dandelions in the spring for half an hour or an hour and watching all the different insects which come there for feed. It's a much different view than we normally take time for and every time I have done it, I'm amazed by the diversity of insects (including several species of bees) which visit.