Cultivating Conservation

How Local Farmers are Using Nature to Grow Greener

Harnessing Native Pollinator Power with Hedgerows and Shelterbelts

It's a common spring sight in BC- plethoras of beehives scattered through fields and orchards, spreading honeybee pollination power around the province. However, disease, drought, and parasites have left apiarists fighting battles on all sides trying to maintain their hives. And while research is ongoing to try and find solutions, these issues could make bringing in beehives for pollination more difficult.

So what can one do to improve an orchard's resilience to the sting of honeybee losses? Help it pollinate itself with native pollinators! An orchard with healthy natural habitat and pollinator-friendly practices can support huge numbers of pollinators and other beneficial insects, some of which are even more efficient at pollination than honeybees. Some of them even do double duty and both pollinate and eat pests. These insects may already be present in your orchard, so encouraging them to thrive requires only a few adjustments to management practices and a bit of space to stay.

Attracting more pollinators to an area is as simple as providing flowers and giving them somewhere to live. Leaving large natural habitat areas undisturbed is the best practice to encourage these insects, as it already provides both food and shelter, but if there are no natural areas nearby then creating habitat areas can still be beneficial. Planting windbreaks or hedgerows in underused areas or along fence lines offers shelter for pollinators, provides food, and also creates nesting areas.

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Dave and Gabi Cursons planted a shelterbelt on their farm in Cawston, B.C. decades ago. They say they're more likely to see beneficial insects, frogs, and other helpful wildlife than on some conventional farms. By planting certain types of shrubs and wildflowers, they encourage beneficial insects while discouraging pests.

Across the highway, Willis and Bronwyn Brown reached out to OSS and have been establishing native plants along their fencelines for the past few years to help protect their organic farm from pesticide drift from neighbouring conventional farms. When asked about why farming with hedgerows is key to their farm, Willis says "We have farmed successfully with intentional hedgerows and wild spaces for generations here, and it's the way. Not just for ecosystem services like pollinators, predators, and protection from erosion etc, not just for the intrinsically valuable other life forms that share our space with us, but also because we are a life form too (we are not separate from the environment!) and those spaces make our farms nicer, more bountiful, and more beautiful places to be for us. They affect the style of our existence."

Meanwhile, in Osoyoos, Osoyoos Larose is just embarking on a similar initiative to establish hedgerows in their vineyard. Osoyoos Larose has centred their vineyard design on allowing them to work in harmony with the environment. While they have trained their staff in snake safety and coexistence, they wanted more- and are looking forward to enhancing shelterbelts within their Osoyoos vineyard.

To create refuge habitat, plant native long-blooming wildflowers such as yarrow, brown-eyed susan, showy milkweed, and asters to provide year-round nectar for the pollinators to eat after fruit trees have finished flowering. Even predatory insects can live twice as long when there are flowers around, as they will also eat nectar if they temporarily can't find prey. Shrubs like wild rose, mock-orange or willow provide habitat structure. Many pollinators and predatory insects need dead wood for nesting; this can include fallen logs, untreated fence posts, and even old wooden sheds. Bumble, mining, and carpenter bees need loose, bare soil for nesting.

"Nature-based Solutions´ is a concept that covers a range of ecosystem-related land management approaches that include ecosystem-based adaptation, natural climate solutions, and green infrastructure to address common concerns. Many local farms are on the leading edge of applying nature-based solutions to enhance productivity on their farms while also benefiting wildlife through enhancing and maintaining habitat.