

Helping the Birds and the Bees: Tips to Boost Pollinators on Your Equestrian Property

By Christina Keim for ELCR

From “No Mow May” to delaying fall cleanups, many Americans are embracing land management strategies intended to increase the availability of resources that our pollinator species need. What many equestrians may not realize is their horse farm—whether a tidy backyard set up for a few beloved companions or a full-scale equine operation—can offer prime real estate for these essential players in the process of plant reproduction.

Boosting pollinator habitat on your horse farm is not only beneficial to these special species themselves—it also can lead to enhanced soil health, cleaner water, and more robust pastures for equine residents. And the good news is that creating or enhancing existing pollinator habitat on your farm doesn’t necessarily require wide-scale effort or investment. Often, you can make life easier for pollinators by simply shifting your maintenance routine and mindset to consider their needs for shelter, food, and water.

**

Colorado-based Steve Armstead is the Pollinator Conservation Specialist for the [Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation](#); he and his partner are also avid equestrians, and he believes balancing the needs of horses with those of pollinators on the same property is an achievable goal. He emphasizes there are many small steps farm owners and managers can take to make their equine facility more pollinator-friendly—and that doing something small is better than doing nothing at all.

“There’s always nuances and aspects of your specific region, and what a person is trying to achieve with their operation, that have to be factored in,” Armstead says of choosing pollinator-boosting practices for your facility. “I want to maintain a farm that is successful in giving a good life to our horses, and where compatible, continue to increase the way pollinators and other wildlife can benefit from the fact we manage acreage.”

One relatively easy first step is to incorporate native plant species offering pollinators forage, nectar, and/or shelter into the landscaped areas on your property. Native plants naturally attract local pollinators and typically are hardier than non-native species, meaning they require less support and maintenance to thrive. If you particularly enjoy seeing certain pollinator species, such as native bees,



Karin Jokela, Xerces Society

What Is a Pollinator?

The term “pollinator” is used to describe certain animal species that help plants reproduce by spreading pollen from flower to flower. Pollinator species include a range of insects (such as bees, wasps, beetles, moths, and butterflies), birds, and some species of bats. Pollen grains attach to these animals as they visit a flower; when the pollinator moves on to another flower of the same species, some of these grains are deposited, hopefully leading to fertilization.

Pollinator species are not always looking for food when they visit the flowers of native plants. Sometimes, they are seeking shelter, mates, or nest-building materials. Regardless of their reason for popping in, according to the National Park Service, pollinators are responsible for fertilizing at least 75% of all flowering plants on the planet. This includes 180,000 different types of plants, and over 1,200 types of food crops.

butterflies, or hummingbirds, installing their favorite plants can draw them to the gardens around houses, offices, sheds, and outbuildings.

“It’s an easy win-win, even when one of the goals is also to be mindful of the overall aesthetic,” says Armstead. “Even with native plants, it is possible for the landscaping to have a bit of a more manicured look, if that is important to you.”

Next, consider allowing your farm’s “transition zones” to go a little wild. These are spaces on the farm not typically used by horses—for example, along driveways and access roads, spaces between a trail and a fence, around equipment sheds, fenced off corners, or places where the terrain is too steep for other uses. Drainage ditches, ponds and other waterways are also locations which naturally lend themselves to pollinator habitat.

“Often, these areas already have vegetation native to your region with benefit to wildlife or are places where you can reintroduce these species and allow them to regenerate themselves,” says Armstead. “Areas around wetlands and other riparian areas are highly sensitive and important to protect as a vital ecological resource.

“There are places on the farm where the aesthetic is more important, for example, where you have an interface with your customers,” he continues. “There are certain places you may want or need to maintain more heavily, but there may be other locations that are more out of view, where you don’t have to use the same maintenance ethic. Those are the spaces that might be easier to let the grass grow a little longer, or let the shrubs grow in a little thicker.”

Some visitors to your farm may initially perceive these less-maintained, wild-looking areas to be a sign of poor upkeep. However, Armstead believes putting a more diverse native plant community on public display presents an important educational opportunity for the environmentally-minded equestrian.

“There is a lot of benefit to education and communication about what you are doing,” says Armstead. “You can put out signs or share information in your farm newsletter to let people know why it looks a little different. It can be quite pretty, but it’s a transition, and it’s important to tell people what you are doing and why.”

**

Another important step toward promoting pollinator habitat on your farm is to practice “mindful mowing.” This concept can be applied to lawns, open areas, and grass turnouts or pastures, and represents a change in mindset around the frequency, timing, and intensity of mowing practices, as well as acceptance of more diverse plant species in grassy areas on your property. To some degree, best practices around the timing of mowing will be specific to your region.

Identifying Native Plants

You don’t have to become a botanist to learn which weeds, grasses, forbs (non-grass flowering species), shrubs, and trees are native to your area.

Depending on your location, you might choose to hire a landscape designer familiar with native species, work with your local county extension or Natural Resources Conservation Service agent (these services are typically free), or simply type your zip code into the [Native Plant Finder](#), provided by the National Wildlife Federation.

“We’ve all been programmed to an aesthetic of a nice, tidy lawn, and even I battle that sometimes,” says Armstead. “But we get in a bad cycle when we manicure our spaces so heavily we don’t have a diversity of habitat for these insects and other species to survive.” Mindful mowing can be as simple as setting the mowing deck higher or extending the length of time between each mowing. For fields or other areas which are only mowed periodically, consider rotating the time of year when that mowing happens, thereby allowing different plant species to complete their life cycle with each cut. Alternatively, mow only a small section of the field or pasture, leaving the rest tall. If you notice an area where pollinator-friendly plants are flourishing, consider delaying the mow until their flowers are gone.



Kelly Gill, Xerces Society

Because good pasture management is so critical for equine health and well-being, this is perhaps one area where promoting pollinators must be carefully balanced with the needs of your herd. Although a pasture containing a diversity of native grasses and forbs will be more resilient to environmental challenges (like drought), some of these species can be toxic to horses. Good pasture management in grazing areas means watching for toxic plants and removing them when necessary.

One final benefit of mindful mowing is that the enhanced habitat it creates contributes to a balanced ecosystem, with natural complexity and diversity in plant and animal species. In addition to supporting pollinators, a balanced ecosystem will benefit predatory insects, insect-eating birds, and bats, which all help manage common barnyard pests such as mosquitoes and flies. Ultimately, a balanced ecosystem will reduce the need for the use of toxic herbicides and pesticides on your property.

“If we boost the natural systems, they can actually do some self-regulating for us,” explains Armstead. “It’s incumbent on us, if we care about pollinators and the overall health of our land and ourselves, to be careful about how we use pesticides and other toxic chemicals in our spaces.”

Identifying Toxic Plants

Certain common plant species—even those native to your region—can be toxic to horses. While it is usually safe to allow these species to grow on areas of your farm that horses can't access, removing toxic plants from grazing areas is generally considered best practice. [Check out this list](#), provided by Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, as a good starting point. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [offers this comprehensive guide](#) to toxic plants. You can also reach out to your local cooperative extension agent for guidance.

“You want to be thoughtful and learn about what you're using and why,” he continues. “If possible, find alternative ways to deal with the pest or the problem plant, and save insecticides and herbicides as a last resort.”

**

Promoting pollinator habitat on your horse farm doesn't have to become an overwhelming project. Armstead recommends tackling just one aspect at a time, choosing the piece of the puzzle which feels most accessible to you.

“Try it and see how it works,” says Armstead. “For example, if you are going to plant some native plants, try them in a small plot, learn from that, and expand from there.”

And perhaps most importantly, don't get so caught up on promoting pollinators that you forget to step back once in

a while and literally smell the flowers.

“All work and no play doesn't make for a great experience,” says Armstead. “Stop and see who is visiting. You might see some new residents and you didn't even know that what you were doing was working for the butterflies and the bees.”

About the Author: Christina Keim, M. Ed., M.F.A., is a professional writer and the founder and principal horseman at [Cold Moon Farm](#) in Rochester, N.H., a working horse farm dedicated to the principles of sustainable living, conservation, and the highest standards of horsemanship.