LETTER: Pollinator decline threatens crops and ecosystems

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At a Friends of White's Woods' Sept. 25 webinar, Dr. Christine Grozinger addressed questions related to the ongoing precipitous decline of pollinators, along with suggestions for methods of slowing or reversing this decline.

According to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, numbers of North American bumblebees have fallen nearly 50% since 1974. NatureServe reports that "Over 22% of North American pollinators are at elevated extinction risk, with 34.7% of the remaining bees identified as "at risk."

There has been a 22% decline of butterflies in Pennsylvania. Seventy percent of honeybee populations have been lost in commercial honeybee operations.

Pollinators, including bees, transfer pollen between plants to support plant reproduction. Ninety percent of plants rely on pollinators to make seeds and fruit. Seventy-five percent of our crops, including apples, broccoli, and even cherry trees, rely on pollinators for a successful harvest.

Pollinators are not the only insects in steep decline. Overall, insects, that provide the base of our food chain, have been declining at a rate of about 2% per year. In some areas, for instance, moth populations have declined by 85% in the last 70 years.

Factors responsible for the pollinator decline include changing landscape usage patterns that reduce pollinator habitat, and the changing weather that is being fueled by ongoing climate change. Unintentional effects of pesticide use have also contributed to the decline.

If we add more flowering plants, Grozinger explained, we will make our bees more resilient. We also need to protect or expand natural habitat so that pollinators have a place to nest.

Suggestions for improving habitat for pollinators can be found at the website Beescape.org This website provides information about what to plant, how to create nesting sites and other tips for landscapers. Herbaceous perennials, shrubs and deciduous trees can be planted to support various pollinators such as bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and flies. Reliance on native plants is recommended. Ideally, a garden should have blooms available from early spring into autumn.

Grozinger also suggested that those who are interested in supporting pollinators consider participating in the Penn State Master Gardner program.

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