

Spring Home & Garden



Help Save the Bees

Bees produce more than tasty, sweet honey. We owe most of our food to the hard work of one of the species of apis. Seventy out of the top 100 human food crops, about 90 percent of the world's nutrition, are pollinated by bees, Greenpeace says. But bees are in crisis.

Colony collapse disorder occurs when most of a colony's worker bees disappear, causing the colony to slowly die off. CCD ran rampant starting in the mid-2000s, when beekeepers began reporting up to a 90 percent loss of their hives. The disorder has scaled off somewhat, but bees are also under attack from pesticides, global warming, habitat loss and diseases.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Start by looking at what pesticides you use and opting, if possible, for organic solutions that don't harm bees. Then plan some plantings. When choosing new spring color for your beds, ask your nursery worker to point you toward flowering plants that bees like and that are native to your area, requiring less



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chemical care than other varieties.

BUILD A BEE HOUSE

Build or buy bee houses for your garden. North America is home to more than 4,000 native bee species — honey bees were imported from

Europe in the 1600s — and most of those don't live in hives, the National Wildlife Federation says. Instead, they live in small nests carved into soil or wood. And, bonus, they rarely sting. Talk to your local nursery or agriculture extension agent about what

bees live in your area and how to create the best habitat for them.

DON'T FORGET THE WATER

Bees and other pollinators need water, too. Add a water feature to your garden. It can

be as simple as a bird bath you regularly refresh. Add rocks or pebbles that stick out above the water line to give bees and other insects a safe place to land. Dump the water every few days to kill any mosquito larvae, and stay away from chemicals.



Plant Local

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Native planting means choosing blooms and bushes that grow in your area on their own.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture says native plantings are already adapted to your climate and soil conditions and provide important nectar, pollen and seeds to native fauna.

They do not require fertilizers, need fewer pesticides, are less thirsty and can prevent erosion, may not require mowing, and promote biodiversity.

KNOW YOUR ZONE

The first step to native planting is to know your planting zone. The USDA maintains the map, which is available online. Before you leave for your local nursery or garden store, look up your address on the map and determine your plant hardiness zone.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Look around your yard. Observe the places where you want to plant and how many hours of sun and shade those spots get.

Does water pool there? Is it dry? What's the soil like? Is it close to your

house or driveway? What native plants are around you? What's your budget? These are all questions the plant experts at your local garden store will ask.

BE PATIENT

Remember, this is a marathon. Native plants may take a year or so to get established and grow into their new habitat, the USDA warns. When you plant, you'll also need to leave room for the plants to grow and propagate.

If the gaps in your garden are killing you, ask your garden center about potted plants or small garden sculptures

you can easily move to fill in.

CONTROLLING WEEDS AND INVASIVE SPECIES

While you're at the nursery center, talk to the experts there about weed control and invasive species to look for. Especially if you're reusing beds that were planted with invasive species before, you may have your hands full for a couple of years. Weed control techniques to consider are pulling them by hand, using environmentally friendly mulches to suppress weeds among young plants, and the careful use of herbicides.

Edible Landscapes

You can pack your gardens with plants that are edible to more than just bees and butterflies. With a little work, you can make your yard beautiful both outdoors and on your dinner plate.

WHAT DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

First, determine what kind of things you want to grow and how much work you want to put in. Are you comfortable on ladders, and do you have the room for fruit trees? Do you use a lot of herbs? What about edible flowers, such as viola?

COLOR ON MORE THAN YOUR PLATE

We know it's healthful to eat the rainbow and a plate full of colorful veg looks tasty. But you also can take advantage of those bright, beautiful colors in your garden. Consider pairing bursts of colorful greens, such as species of cabbage or kale, with snowy white cauliflower. Take advantage of the tall, leggy shapes of beans and tomatoes. Alternate the shapes not only for optic interest, but also to prevent diseases from spreading.

HERBS IN MORE THAN PESTO

Mix and match herbs with ornamentals in your garden. Some species even masquerade as ornamentals, especially if you leave some to bloom and go to seed. They also make a tasty meal for pollinators or even boost the smell in a bouquet of your homegrown blooms. Again, make sure to plan for your location and color. There are species of



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basil, for example, that are deep, vibrant purple and oregano that turns a lovely soft silver.

PERFECT POTS

If you've got a small space, never fear. Your local garden center can point you to herbs,

greens, tomatoes and even fruit trees that thrive in pots. Remember to consider how you'll move the pots in case

of a cold snap and how to feed and maintain these miniature produce aisles in your yard.



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The Small Garden

Even if you don't have a large yard or green space to work with, you can still have a beautiful outdoor space to work out your green thumb. Here are some hints for making the most of your little slice of the great outdoors.

THINK VERTICAL

Just like in cities, the quickest way to get more space may be to go up. Line a fence or wall with artfully placed flower boxes and alternate color and greenery. Choose plants for leafy texture as well as blossoms, and remember to take into account the amount of sun your space gets. Not into a lot of elbow grease outdoors? Try shelves of succulents in a variety of colors and pots.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF VINES

You don't need a lot of room for

flowering (or even fruiting) vines to grow. Instead, arrange them along shaped trellises or cages and take advantage of their natural propensity to spread. Keep the vines pruned to keep them from taking over.

CREATIVE CONTAINERS

Keep in mind that your containers will need to drain, be mobile and stand up to the elements. Once that's covered, you can make almost anything into a flower pot with a little work. Get creative and recycle (clean)

tin cans and interesting containers. A lot of local garden centers and pottery shops may also offer up pretty pots at great prices.

PAIR IT UP

If you're planting edible plants, such as fruit trees, pair them up, if needed, so they bear fruit. Talk to the experts at your garden center about varieties that need a mate and those that are self-pollinating. Many fruit trees are created to grow on patios, including apples, citrus, peaches and more.

Patio Perfect

Now that warmer weather is here, it's time to get outside and get your patio ready for morning coffee, solo time with a book or a big dinner with friends and family. Keep reading for more tips on creating the perfect outdoor space to fit your needs and your budget.

FURNITURE

After a long winter outdoors, you may need to freshen up your furniture a bit. First, try cleaning it. Try a mix of 2 cups of white vinegar to 2 tablespoons of dish soap. Spot test it first to make sure the solution doesn't ruin any fabrics or finishes. If you're good to go, work it into the hard surfaces with a stiff-bristled brush and rinse well. You can also use this solution on cushions and umbrellas (again, spot test first) with a softer brush.

If a good wash doesn't work, maybe it's time for a fresh coat of paint. Take your cleaned furniture to an open, well-ventilated space and opt for an outdoor spray paint that's appropriate to your furniture's material. If you're painting metal furniture, look for a paint that inhibits rust. For plastic, make sure the paint you pick will adhere to plastics. While matte finishes are in, glossy finishes are easier to clean. Your local home store offers a variety of paints, colors and finishes to choose from.



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MADE IN THE SHADE

Throw the best kind of shade — the kind you can sip a lovely beverage under. Look beyond the umbrella at sun-sails, awnings, canopies and more. Some more complex

installs, like a retractable awning, may require professional installation. But there are easier solutions you can do yourself, like a sail or a canopy. Just make sure your shady

solution is securely fastened so it doesn't blow away in a summer storm.

PICK A PECK OF POTS

Get creative with contain-

ers, textures and blooms in your patio space. Choose plants with leaves and blooms that complement the colors of your furniture and cushions.

If your thumb is a lighter shade of green, ask the pros at your garden center to help you pick easy-care plants that can stand up to the weather in your area.

Hiring an Exterior Painter

All the sprucing up in the yard may make you turn a critical eye to the exterior of your home.

While you can paint the outside of your home yourself, most homeowners choose to hire a contractor for this big job. Here are some tips for picking a pro from Consumer Reports.

SET UP A MEETING

Ask friends, family and the local paint store for recommendations, then set up a meeting time with each contractor. He or she will want to walk around your home and take a close look at all the surfaces to provide a detailed estimate. Be wary of short visits. Ask how big the contractor's crew is and how much experience they have.

GET IT IN WRITING

Each contractor should provide you with a written estimate that includes a complete breakdown of costs, including labor and supplies. Look for the brand of paint they plan to use, number of coats and surface prep work that must be done, like replacing rotten wood. Once you pick a contractor, they also should provide you with a written contract. The contract should include everything in the estimate, plus a clear outline of what is and is not included in the work. You also can ask for a



guarantee of the work; your paint may offer a warranty, but it probably doesn't include labor.

CHECK REFERENCES AND CREDENTIALS

Talk to past clients and, if you can, look at their work

from several years ago to see how well it holds up. Also check more recent projects to see the skills of the current

crew. Make sure each contractor is up to date with any local or state licenses and that they have their own insurance.

Keeping your Cool

Warm breezes mean the return of the air conditioning season is right around the corner.

Make sure your unit is ready to keep you cool with a little preventive maintenance. Here are some tips from the DIY Network on how to keep your HVAC in its best shape.

A GOOD CLEANING

Give your outside unit a good cleaning before the full heat of summer hits. Clear away any debris, like the last of winter's dead leaves, from inside and outside the unit. Remove the fan cage and give the inside and outside of the fins on the walls of the unit a gentle spray with a hose. If they're especially dirty, hit the home improvement center for a spray cleaner just for HVAC units. While you're cleaning, look for bent fins and straighten them with a fin straightening tool or a butter knife. Be gentle, though; you don't want to damage the tubing.

INSIDE MAINTENANCE

For the inside unit, remove the panel to expose the condenser inside. Dust the coil with a soft brush, then use a no-rinse condenser cleaner spray from the home improvement store to clean it. Clean the drip pan with soap and hot water, then dump a 50-50 solu-



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tion of water and bleach down the pan to inhibit algae growth.

HIRING A PRO

If any of this sounds like

hard work, or if you have a clog or discover a problem with your HVAC, turn to a pro. Some heating and air companies may even offer a

maintenance contract where they drop by on a schedule. Look for a heating and air service with good recommendations. As with any contrac-

tor, also check to make sure their licenses and insurance are up to date and get any estimates and contracts in writing.