

Sow There: How to build a backyard bee hotel

By Heather Hacking, Chico Enterprise-Record

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Bees are pretty darn important and they're having a hard time.

Many news articles have informed the public about hives that collapse, bees in short supply and people who steal bees. That's all true.

Yet, we often forget to talk about the other bees — those solitary bees that dig holes in raw dirt and make homes in forgotten piles of waste wood.

Solitary bees like to feel the wind in their hair, don't ask for directions and answer to no one.

This week about 60 people crowded into a classroom at the Chico State University Farm for a workshop on building bee hotels.

Our bee helpers were Natasha Aybar and Lee Altier.

When we think bees we think "social bees." These live in hives or are attached to Winnie the Pooh's head. Social bees are also used extensively in agriculture, including the almonds being pollinated right now.

Yet, only about 10 percent of the world's bees are social.

Of the estimated 1,600 types of bees in California, about 70 percent live in holes in the ground. Another large portion live in holes in wood or stone.

Solitary bees, unlike honey bees, do not die after stinging. However, they are also less likely to sting because they are not protecting a colony.

Construction

Before the workshop Wednesday, Lee and Natasha had built wooden frames from untreated fence boards.

With the frames in place, they cut chunks of tree limbs into sections 3-6 inches long and one to six inches in diameter.

Next they drilled holes into the chunks of wood. This is where the bees will build a nest.

In nature, solitary bees might find a hole made by a beetle. Certain bees also make their own holes.

When you get busy with the drill, make the holes anywhere from 1/8 to 3/8 of an inch wide and 3-6 inches deep. The holes also need to be smooth. If they're scratchy or have splinters, the bee will choose another condo, Natasha explained.

Next, arrange the pieces of wood into the bee frame.

You can keep it simple, or provide a variety of different shapes and sizes.

Other material could include bundles of reeds, or even small plastic piping (with holes 1/8 to 3/8 of an inch wide).

Material gathered for the project this week included kiwi prunings and grape vines.

Some people will also drill holes into adobe bricks.

For some simple examples, check this website: <http://tinyurl.com/jdo43k2>

Note that the individual holes/homes may be close to each other, but these are still solitary bees. The house will be like a big-city tenement house, with individual residents passing each other but not saying hello.

When completed, the best place to park the hotels is where they will receive morning sun.

It's also best to put them a few feet off the ground where they won't be jostled by critters or children.

A few websites note that the holes could be inhabited by other critters, such as hornets or even bee predators. That's part of nature.

The workshop this week was put on by [Cultivating Community, North Valley](#).

Another workshop Tuesday

If you missed the workshop last week, another one is planned Tuesday, at the [Chico Grange Hall](#), 2775 Old Nord Ave. A potluck starts at 6 p.m., with a talk immediately after.

Another way to help bees is to plant things that they like. For more, check out [Xerces.org](#) Among the resources [online](#) is a list of what to grow to make bees happy.

Local nursery crawl

You're in luck. The Local Nursery Crawl is today and Saturday.

Nurseries on the crawl are expecting more visitors and will provide extra surprises including sales, plant workshops and raffles.

If you collect stickers from six nurseries, you get a Nursery Crawl tote bag, while supplies last.

The whole point is to visit new places and learn what they offer.

Most nurseries have specialties and staff prepared to answer questions about these special plants.

To print out the list of locations: <http://www.localnurserycrawl.com>.

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