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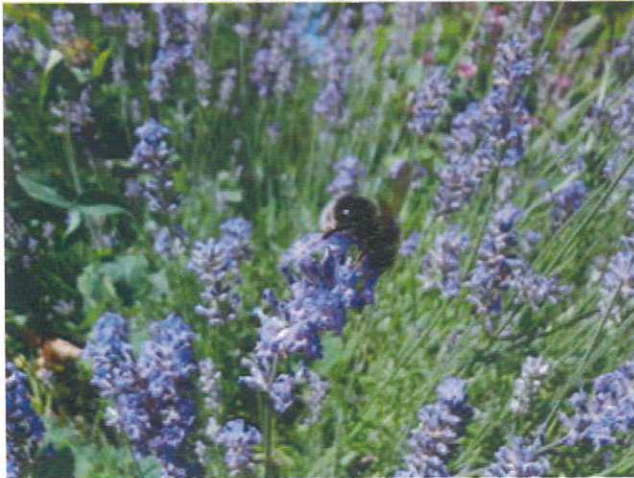
Originally published Friday, September 5, 2014 at 5:29 PM

Guest: The citizen wildlife steward and the return of the Western bumblebee

Anyone with a yard can play a role in helping revive the Western bumblebee, writes guest columnist Julie O'Donald.

By Julie O'Donald

Special to The Times



THE resurgence of the Western bumblebee in the Western U.S. since it began to disappear in the 1990s has attracted the interest of scientists and even an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign to survey the bees.

The first reported sighting of the Western bumblebee, *Bombus occidentalis*, in the Puget Sound region in many years occurred during August 2012 in my certified habitat garden located in Brier.

This half-acre garden, specifically designed to provide plantings similar to those found in nature, follows guidelines given by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

and the National Wildlife Federation with optional certification available.

A backyard wildlife habitat garden is a landscape that allows birds, butterflies and pollinators to exist in close proximity to humans, and provides essential habitat in an increasingly fragmented landscape.

Anyone with a yard can play a role in helping revive the Western bumblebee. As European honey bee populations plummet, native bees have become essential to carry out pollination and ensure the success of food crops. Gardens that include native plants and avoid use of garden chemicals have the potential to boost bumblebee populations.

In 2012, University of Washington graduate student, Hillary Burgess requested participants for her citizen science study of the relationship between pollinators and native plants (or lack of them) in local suburban gardens. My family welcomed this opportunity to learn more about the variety of insects we had been observing.

Our habitat garden features many native flowering shrubs, native perennials and other plants that offer nectar, pollen and fruit. In particular there are large swaths of huckleberries, goldenrod, pearly everlasting, aster and milkweed. This wide buffet of nectar and pollen, available from early spring to late autumn frost, increases the chance that pollinators will be able to sustain

themselves.

Hillary's citizen science project empowered participants by providing information and training in pollinator identification, including the Western bumblebee. Specific protocols for observations began in March 2012 and continued through August that year.

My daughter Megan O'Donald, also currently a UW graduate student, became keenly adept at observation and took many photographs. She sent a photograph of the white-tailed bumblebee seen during these garden observations, to the nonprofit Xerces Society for confirmation and this became the first documented occurrence of *Bombus occidentalis* in the Puget Sound region in close to a decade.

This finding was more than a random accident and offers hope for bumblebees. Garden habitats rich with native plants and neighborhoods that connect these habitats with natural areas are key to bumblebee survival.

Creating a backyard habitat can be as simple as adding native plants in planter boxes on an apartment balcony. It includes providing water, places for nest sites, native plants and avoiding the use of garden chemicals. Bumblebees may even nest in previously used birdhouses.

This creates an advantage for gardeners who become fortunate enough to have their own supply of native pollinators. For many plants, bumblebees are considered more effective pollinators than honeybees. Instead of removing a bumblebee nest, informed gardeners are likely to recognize the valuable service these bees provide and allow the nest to remain. The National Wildlife Federation at nwf.org offers more information as does the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife at wdfw.wa.gov/living/backyard/

The Xerces Society has launched a new program, BumbleBeeWatch.org in partnership with other organizations. This program allows those who wish to learn more about bumblebees an opportunity to submit photos that will help map bumblebee populations. The Xerces website bringbackthepollinators.org and book, "Attracting Native Pollinators" also offer a wealth of information.

The true story of tracking the imperiled western bumblebee is a unique combination of citizen science, backyard wildlife habitat and collaboration made possible by involved organizations. To everyone who cares about pollinators, this is your opportunity to get involved.

Julie O'Donald of Brier is a Master Gardener and Backyard Wildlife Habitat Steward certified by the National Wildlife Federation.



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