



A runner jogs along the west end of the Pendleton River Walkway on Sunday in Pendleton.

Photo contributed by Jack Simons

Winter-blooming plants help bees overwinter in your yard

By DEAN FOSDICK
Associated Press

Winter and early spring are lean times for honeybees as they emerge from their hives, where food supplies are dwindling, to forage. Adding clusters of winter-blooming plants around the yard will give them much needed nourishment.

Bees take in carbohydrates from floral nectar and protein from floral pollen. Being aware of bloom times and providing flowers that overlap the seasons are important for beekeepers who want to successfully overwinter their colonies.

Some bees, including many wild varieties, begin searching for food as early as January, when sunny days can push temperatures up to 55 degrees Fahrenheit or more.

"In the early spring, bees are going to need food to get their engines started again," said Andony Melathopoulos, a bee specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service. "You can't simply start up your gardening routines (for pollinators) again in the spring. Solitary wild bees, honeybees and hummingbirds are just clinging to life.

"The preparation you do



Dean Fosdick via AP

This April 4, 2016 photo provided by Dean Fosdick shows blooms on a Big Leaf Maple tree near Langley, Wash., which are among the first to arrive — providing floral nectar and pollen for early-season foraging bees.

now is very important since early spring is a vulnerable

time for pollinators."

Pollinator plants like

crocus, primrose and snowdrops will bloom even when

snow is on the ground. Trees and shrubs also are effective choices for feeding early emerging honeybees.

"People often overlook trees," Melathopoulos said. "But when it comes to late winter and early spring, it's the trees that are important. Willows, maples, filberts and hazelnuts are some of the earliest sources of pollen you'll find. They're easy to establish and grow."

He also suggests establishing the early blooming plants in clusters to make it easier for foraging honeybees to spot and access them.

"Bees are efficient pollinators," Melathopoulos said. "They really appreciate patches of flowers. They can go from flower to flower easily. It's hard for them to work on cool days, and if they don't have to fly between clusters, they really appreciate it."

Many winter-flowering plants grow in the wild, but pollinators generally don't live near them, he said. That makes cultivating winter bloomers important when you're planning your gardens.

Property owners also should leave suitable places for native bees to hibernate undisturbed. Let turf grass grow long over the winter.

Avoid pesticides. Reduce lawn size and turn instead to protective shrubs.

Even a small amount of habitat will be enough to sustain bees, Melathopoulos said. "These are tiny creatures. Well-thought-out landscapes can provide all the food they need in winter. Gardeners can really help with that."

Here are some additional bee-friendly plants that can provide a degree of brightness in winter while also nourishing pollinators:

— Oregon grape, an evergreen shrub that produces yellow flowers blooming for weeks.

— Heath and heather. "In shades of purple to copper to gold, these low-growing plants make a mat of color throughout the year, including winter," Melathopoulos said.

— Male willow plants, maples, apple, crabapple, native cherry. "I'd start with these shrubs," said Mace Vaughan, pollinator program director for The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in Portland, Oregon.

"Native plants selected to feed bees are definitely part of the solution" to declining bee populations, Vaughan said.

Creepers Trail invites bikers to take it easy

By KAREN TESTA
Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Virginia (AP) — It was an invitation even teenagers who had hoped to be watching college football or playing video games couldn't resist: a mountain bike ride — all downhill.

Visitors to the Virginia Creeper Trail will find a remarkably family-friendly ride, adaptable to any skill level, and with scenery to hold anyone's attention. With its broad paths and wide curves, the Creeper encourages riders to take it at any comfortable pace, with plenty of opportunities for breaks along the way.

The trail runs about 34 miles from Whitetop Station in Whitetop, Virginia (about a mile or 1.6 km shy of the North Carolina border) into Abingdon, Virginia. But its most popular segment is the first 17 miles from Whitetop to Damascus, on a stone dust



AP Photo/Karen Testa

This Oct. 7, 2017 photo shows Zack Wong, 14, of Wynnewood, Pa., riding along the Virginia Creeper Trail near Damascus, Va.

and gravel trail that allows bikers to reap the benefits of gravity on a gorgeous, woody path over dozens of trestles and bridges back into town.

At least a half-dozen outfitters in the area rent bikes (including some with "comfort seats" for a slight

upcharge) and provide shuttles to Whitetop Station. The shuttle trip up the twisting and turning mountain roadway — where speed limits reduce at several places to 20 mph — takes a bit more than an hour from Abingdon and about 40 minutes from Damascus. It's well worth

the \$25 fee per rider.

Note to procrastinators: Book ahead during busy times, like fall foliage season when rental shops sell out on weekends.

Once at Whitetop Station, riders claim their bikes and head out. On a recent October weekend, with low humidity, moderate temperatures and near peak foliage, the trail was heavily traveled and sometimes crowded with bikers ranging from toddlers in trailers to grandparents. But calling out a simple, "On your left!" got most of the slower riders to ease to the side and allow others to pass.

Still, there was no hurry. Speed would be contrary to the spirit of the Creeper.

HISTORY OF THE CREEPER

The Creeper began as a Native American footpath. Later it was used by colonists and settlers including Daniel Boone, according to a history provided by the U.S. Forest

Service. By the early 1900s, it was a rail line, where steam engines moved coal, lumber, passengers and other supplies from Abingdon to North Carolina.

The nickname, the Virginia Creeper, is said to come from the super slow speed at which the early steam locomotives navigated the many twists and turns and chugged up the mountain pass.

But the rail line struggled, and after decades of failing to turn a profit, the railroad company petitioned to abandon the line. The Creeper saw its last train run in the 1970s, and the U.S. Forest Service secured much of the land and started removing the track.

ALL DOWNHILL

The most popular segment — the 17 miles (27 km) from Whitetop Station to Damascus — requires only moderate pedaling given the gentle downhill slope. Signs along the route indi-

cate when hikers or bikers are coming into the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area or moving onto private property.

There are plenty of spots to stop along the way, including restrooms.

Green Cove Station Visitor Center is the first significant stop, and is just 3 miles from Whitetop Station. One of the most picturesque areas along the path is the High Trestle, a little more than 7 miles from the top. The elevated structure stretches 550 feet and is 100 feet tall.

Taylor's Valley is about 11 miles from the top, and a perfect spot for a break, especially if the volunteers from the local church are set up on the green. Recently, about a half-dozen church members were offering hot dogs with homemade slaw and chili, cookies, fruit salad, pumpkin roll, chips and cold drinks — all for a free-will donation.