

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 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.

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.

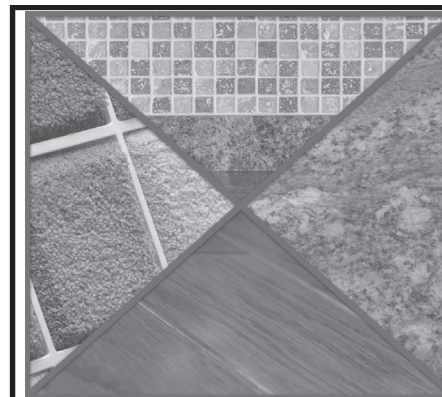
Get it in Writing

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.



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