District: Local plants are best

Umpqua Post/Alex Powers

Umpqua Soil and Water District Assistant Laura Smith inspects a young currant plant last week in Reedsport.

By Alex Powers, Staff Writer
Thursday, June 24, 2010

Hummingbirds and alkali bees can replace European bees as pollinators

Flowers are pretty. Native flowers, however, are more attractive.

That's the case for at least one local conservation organization. Umpqua Soil and Water Conservation District staff are stepping up efforts among nearby landowners to encourage planting native species wherever and whenever possible.

District Assistant Conservation Technician Laura Smith said plants native to the surrounding geography help balance populations of insects and animals known as pollinators.

"Native plants are four times more attractive to native pollinators," Smith said.

Hosts of bees, beetles, birds and bats feed on flowers — or other pollinators, she said.

Smith said some native pollinator populations, such as the ground-nesting alkali bee, often are treated as pests.

Throughout the U.S., commercial populations of European honey bees are commonly used to pollinate food crops.

But European honey bees are dying off. Colonies are vanishing suddenly while some research points to neonicotinoid insecticides as

the culprit.

While researchers puzzle over vanishing honeybees, some farmers and land managers are turning to other creatures that can pollinate plants.

“It’s an insurance policy,” Smith said. “It perfectly ties agriculture into conservation.”

By planting a variety of native blooms in different shapes and colors, land owners can recruit several pollinators like hummingbirds and native bees to replace honeybees.

“This is a resource that some are considering as they (honeybees) disappear,” Smith said.

Other insects attracted to local plants, such as predatory beetles, eat slugs and slug eggs, reducing the need for pesticides.

Most agriculture in coastal Douglas County is limited to hay, livestock and forests.

The district works with other land managers, however, such as the forestry corporation Roseburg Resources. Smith said the district tries to partner with such land managers to plant native species in the riparian buffer around streams.

Streams within managed forests often were affected by decades of deforestation. Plants are commonly brought in to stabilize stream banks.

“We want the things back that were there,” Smith said.

Ideally, native plants diversify forests that were heavily managed for Douglas fir that is commonly harvested for timber.

Forests of old contained a multitude of plants with trees ranging in age from saplings to large old-growth.

“There was, historically, greater diversity,” Smith said.

Management by settlers for commercial timber, and before that by indigenous people for hunting and food crops, eliminated some plants almost completely from local forests.

In BLM surveys from the mid-1800s, plants like yew trees and rhododendrons were recorded along the Smith River in zones where they now can't be found.

Even small private land owners can benefit — urban gardeners can plant natives, too, Smith said.

By including a larger variety of plants that bloom at different times, more pollinators and natural pest control like beetles are likely to turn up.

"It helps bring your yard back to ecological balance," Smith said.

Alex Powers is a staff writer at Reedsport's Umpqua Post, which can be found online at www.theumpquapost.com. Call 541-271-7474 ext. 206 or e-mail apowers@theworldlink.com.