

# wildflower

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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# Color My World

FALL COLORS IN THIS ISSUE

Also NATIVE PERENNIAL CROPS •  
HOW TO SHEET MULCH • COMPOSTING



NATIVE PEOPLE

# For The Bees

Texan finds her calling in helping protect native bees

KIM PEOPLES BACON WENT TO TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY wanting to be Jacques Cousteau but discovered she didn't like scuba diving. "I quickly decided Jacques would have to live without me," says the native Texan, who graduated in 1974 with a degree in wildlife and fisheries science. With few jobs available to women in that field, she conducted field research, taught science and math, and later started a business writing science lesson plans. Eventually, she and her husband, Kevin, ended up in Washington, D.C.

When their son moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas in 2004, they followed. (Her husband now teaches at the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs.) Bacon, looking for a project, chatted with her former entomology professor Gordon Frankie, Ph.D., now at University of California-Berkeley. Frankie studies native bees and runs a website there on urban bee gardens. Bacon casually suggested doing

something similar in Texas – and found her calling.

Texas Bee Watchers launched in 2007 with lists of bee-friendly plants, photos, links to other bee-related sites and "52 Gardens in 52 Weeks," Bacon's effort to get more people planting bee gardens. "I think at the time I was the only person certifying bee gardens. The idea is others could use these gardens as models. Plant the right things in your garden and they will come."

There are 20,000 species of native bees worldwide, about 4,000 in the United States and 1,000 in Texas – although few people know that. "Ask people what kind of bees they know and you get about four," Bacon says. "People weren't looking for native bees in their gardens, so who knows whether they were there or not."

Frankie's research shows that more plant diversity equals more bees. "The optimum is at least 10 different species of flowering plants in your yard," Bacon says. "Yards should be less



PHOTOS COURTESY AUSTIN COMMUNITY LANDFILL BEE GARDEN

manicured, too, because 70 percent of bees nest in the ground. Large patches of flowers are best since they make it possible for bees to hang around gathering pollen and nectar. If they have to go two blocks away for the next patch, that's not efficient." A bee-friendly garden also needs plants that bloom successively from spring through fall.

Why should anyone care about bees? They are, Bacon says, the number-one pollinators, busy all the time. With bees at work, urban gardens and fruit trees have better yields and quality.

ROOT OF THE MATTER

## How to sheet mulch to start a garden

BY WENDY REDDING • PHOTOS BY PHILIP HAWKINS  
OTHER HOW-TO GUIDES CAN BE FOUND AT [WWW.WILDFLOWER.ORG/STEP](http://WWW.WILDFLOWER.ORG/STEP)

**Step 1:** Gather a shovel, rake, water hose, manure or worm castings, compost, mulch and large sheets of cardboard to cover the proposed garden area.



**Step 2:** Cut back or lay down any tall weeds in the garden area. No need to pull the weeds unless they are large woody species. Let the sheet layering do the work.



**Step 3:** Encourage microbial activity by adding a light layer of manure or worm castings no more than an inch thick. Water in well with the hose.







Not to mention bees are cute. “Look in a prickly pear bloom and native bees are in a little frenzy of happiness, running around getting drenched in pollen, just having a good old time.”

Bacon is surprised by the TBW website’s popularity but believes it has helped people become more aware of bees. “I tell people if they’re allergic to honeybee stings, or it makes them uncomfortable, don’t do it. Honeybees have a hive to defend. Male bees don’t sting. Females can, but a solitary bee is so busy preparing her nest, she’s not going to pay attention to you. I have my head in the

middle of huge flower patches all the time and have never been stung.”

Bacon gives talks about native bees, mostly in the winter when she’s not in the garden or watching bees. A few years ago, she and another volunteer, Vernon Berger, put in a 2,500-square-foot bee garden at Waste Management’s Austin Community Landfill.

She’d be thrilled if someone started a bee watch site in another state. “I’m not going to expand beyond Texas. I’m only one person, and I do have a life. I volunteer with the Highland Lakes Master Naturalists, garden and travel quite a bit. And I don’t make any money off Bee Watchers and never intended to.” It’s all, of course, for the bees. ❁

— MELISSA GASKILL

Visit Texas Bee Watch at [beewatchers.com](http://beewatchers.com) and California’s Urban Bee Gardens at [nature.berkeley.edu/urbanbeegardens](http://nature.berkeley.edu/urbanbeegardens).



**ABOVE** Vernon Berger volunteers weekly as a bee watcher at the Austin Community Landfill Garden. **LEFT** The Austin Community Landfill Bee Garden, funded by Waste Management.

**Step 4:** Remove packing tape from cardboard. Cover castings or manure with cardboard, overlapping pieces by at least one foot. Saturate with water.

**Step 5:** On top of the cardboard add three inches of compost that is free of weed seeds. Smooth out evenly. As with all layers, water in thoroughly.

**Step 6:** Add final layer of 3 to 5 inches of mulch. Water in and keep moist for proper breakdown. In six months weeds will die off, leaving rich, healthy garden soil.

