

Canadian golf courses enter new program to increase bee and pollinator populations

Brantford Golf and Country Club and Cutten Fields in Guelph are the first two Canadian golf courses working with Syngenta Canada Inc. on a pilot project designed to transform out-of-play areas into improved habitats for bees and other pollinators. The program, named Operation Pollinator, is designed to boost the number of pollinating insects on golf courses.

The launch of Operation Pollinator in Canada is, in part, based on recognition of the success of similar programs by Syngenta in other countries around the world that have seen significant benefits from these types of initiatives.

“Operation Pollinator first originated in the United Kingdom,” said Dr. Paul Hoekstra, stewardship manager with Syngenta Canada Inc. “In the broadest sense it is about restoring natural habitats and food sources to improve the fortunes of native pollinators, such as bumble bees, butterflies and other insects that thrive when diverse sources of food are available.”

The program includes both on-farm and off-farm components and operates in more than 13 countries. Bee populations and bee health are top-of-mind subjects these days, with several parts of the world coping with significant bee health issues and population declines.

“There is general scientific consensus that bee health is affected by a variety of interdependent factors, including things like parasitic mites, disease, poor nutrition, habitat, inadequate food supplies and management practices, including pesticides, which must be used properly to minimize their impact on bee populations,” Hoekstra said.

That said, the number of bee colonies in Canada has been increasing across the country generally and in Ontario specifically over the last number of years. According to Statistics Canada data, there has been a 40 per cent increase in the number of bee colonies in Canada since the 1950s.

“We want to build on what we have through initiatives such as Operation Pollinator for the benefit of both managed and native pollinators,” Hoekstra said.

Through Operation Pollinator, Syngenta Canada Inc. provides participating golf courses with a custom-blended seed mix that includes native wildflowers. The golf course uses this seed and other management practices to create pollen- and nectar-rich habitats in out-of-play areas.

“Operation Pollinator provides an excellent opportunity for golf courses to diversify their fields of play,” said David Kuypers, golf course superintendent with Cutten Fields. “The program will create habitats that benefit bees and other pollinators, and the wildflowers will also provide new visual features on the golf course as well.”

According to Paul Evenden, course superintendent at the Brantford Golf and Country Club, golf courses provide great potential to create essential habitat and food sources for a range of native bees and pollinating insects.

“Experiences in other jurisdictions have demonstrated that creation of even small areas of dedicated habitat can significantly increase the number of pollinating insects,” he said.

This point is echoed by Hoekstra, who notes that sites that were part of Operation Pollinator in the United Kingdom, which attracted more than 40 different bee species, increased bumble bee numbers by 600 per cent and saw a 12-fold increase in butterflies over a three-year period.

With the pilot program of Operation Pollinator now underway, Syngenta Canada Inc. will be looking to recruit additional golf courses to the program for 2014. Information about the program will be available at the Canadian International Turfgrass Conference taking place in Vancouver, British Columbia in February, 2014, or by contacting Paul Hoekstra at Syngenta Canada.

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