



How bees make Thanksgiving better



As family and friends gather this holiday season, it's important to reflect on the many contributions bees make to hearty Thanksgiving feasts and thriving ecosystems. Bees face a number of challenges and many bee species are in decline, despite their important role in nature. In this factsheet, we review the many dishes that rely on bees and ways you can help save these vital pollinators.

Thanksgiving with bees

Many Thanksgiving favorites wouldn't be the same without bees. Some dishes would even lose their namesake ingredients, such as the pumpkin in pumpkin pie. Below is a list of classic Thanksgiving dishes that have ingredients pollinated by native bees and honey bees.



Thanksgiving staples that need bees

Yellow labels indicate ingredients that rely on bees. Blue labels show foods that have an indirect but often complementary relationship with bees.

Foods that rely on bees

- Green bean casserole: *onions*
- Sweet potato casserole
- Stuffing: *onions*
- Cranberry sauce
- Roasted vegetables: *brussels sprouts, carrots*
- Pumpkin pie
- Apple pie
- Coffee

From the savory to the sweet, bees make the delicious foods on our plate possible. In addition, these ingredients add variety and nutrients to our meals year-round.

A bee-less Thanksgiving

While a Thanksgiving without bees would still have the centerpiece turkey and some sides, these pollinators add to the depth of flavors in these foods. A list of Thanksgiving dishes that would be available but would be better with ingredients from bees is listed to the right.

Foods that don't require bees

- Turkey
- Mashed potatoes
- Dinner rolls
- Wine

A farm turkey's diet typically has a base of corn and soy, which don't need bees to grow, but with visits from bees, crop yields for soy can get a welcome boost. And what's more, many of the herbs used to season the bird, including thyme, rosemary and sage, are bee favorites.

The milk and butter used for sides like mashed potatoes and dinner rolls would be affected since bees pollinate crops such as alfalfa, which are used to feed dairy cows. Similarly, the grapes necessary to make wine are not directly pollinated by bees, but cover crops used to enhance the performance of vineyards and wine flavors rely on bees.





The challenges facing bees

The United States has 4,000 species of native bees, yet more than half of species examined are in decline. Honey bees are also faring poorly. U.S. beekeepers reported losing 45.5% of their colonies last year, which is the second highest annual loss rate on record. A number of factors from habitat loss and pesticide use to climate change contribute to these declines.

Land development for homes and agricultural fields has also led to bees losing their habitats. The endangered rusty patched bumble bee, for example, has lost much of its grassland habitat and is expected to be found in only 0.1% of its historical area. Increased use of pesticides is a common consequence of these changes in land use. A more toxic landscape due to pesticides such as neonicotinoids, which are used both in agriculture and on lawns, makes it harder for bees to navigate to and from their homes and develop.

How you can help

Plant a bee-friendly garden

Gardens act as havens for bees and other pollinators. A variety of flowering plants helps to support many bee species. Contact your local nursery for native plants that are favorites of bees.

Reduce your pesticide use

Make a low- to no-pesticide yard your New Year's resolution. Pesticides often have unintended negative consequences and bees are not immune to their effects. Certain plant species deter pests and attract insect species that can keep pests in check. Also, this Thanksgiving, consider adding organic foods to your cart, since these foods avoid synthetic pesticides known to harm bees.



Nature's best pollinators

Bees pollinate a number of ingredients that together create the flavors of Thanksgiving. Above, a bee pollinates apple blossoms.

Call your elected officials

Make your voice heard on this issue by calling your elected officials, urging them to support initiatives to increase bee habitat or reduce pesticide use.

Contact Us



Faran Savitz

Conservation Associate
PennEnvironment
faran@pennenvironment.org



Stephanie Wein

Clean Water & Conservation Advocate
PennEnvironment
stephanie@pennenvironment.org

