

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

# Please pollinate me

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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Remember when your mother or father sat you down for “that” talk about the birds and bees? They were really talking about pollination, right? People, animals, insects, plants—all living things need to be “pollinated” to continue the species.

When we think of pollinators for plants, we usually think of bees first, but there are actually many other pollinators such as insects, birds, mammals, and, yes, even wind and rain. Pollinators transfer pollen from a stamen, the male portion of a flower, to a pistil, the egg-holding, female part. It is this process that starts the production of seeds.

A pollinator—a bee, for example—is not purposely doing a good deed to the flower and certainly is not in love. Pollinators are self-serving and kiss the flower only to collect nectar for their food. Love has nothing to do with pollinating. Pollination is an accidental gift to the plant from the pollinator. For the plant, though, pollination is all about saving its DNA for the survival of its own species. Pollination is a symbiotic relationship between the pollinator and the plant.

How does a pollinator choose whom to mess around with? Is it just random—whoever is handy? Or is it species specific? Just as evolution is not exactly random but rather functional, so is pollination. Form follows function. Pollinators are attracted to smells, colors, shapes, sweetness, or stink of the nectar. The shape of what is to be pollinated evolves with the pollinator. Which came first? The hummingbird’s long beak or the tubular flower?

Since bees mess around with at least 110 food crops, which feed a variety of living beings—including you—bees are considered to be the most diligent and important of all the accidental pollinators.

Bees and butterflies both like brightly colored plants with a flat landing field. However, bright colors in bee talk do not include red, as bees can’t see red. It is the hummingbird who is partial to reds, plus oranges and whites. Butterflies like a multitude of colors such as white, pink, purple, red, yellow, and orange.

Bees and butterflies are particularly attracted to really sweet or very minty aromas. Hummingbirds are partial to tubular-shaped flowers because of the abundance of nectar pools in the tubular bottom, reachable with its beak.



Lemurs are the world’s largest pollinators (audubon.org/magazine).



A sphinx moth hums as it hovers (discoverlife.org).

If you were a black-and-white ruffed lemur in Madagascar, you might be helping pollinate over 130 different plant species. These cute mammals are known as “the world’s largest pollinators” due to their symbiotic relationship with the traveler’s tree. They feed on the palm-type flowers, forcing the blooms open to access the nectar, in the process getting a dusting of pollen from the plant (indefenseofplants.com).

Beetles, often maligned, make up the largest group of pollinators—mainly because there are so many of them! Roughly counting, there are at least 240,000 known flowering plants on this planet. Of those, 88 percent are pollinated by beetles. Beetles are not fussy eaters—they like flavors and smells ranging from spicy and sweet to ghastrly fermented. Beetles

are not particular either about whom they “date.” They will dance with a dainty goldenrod or mamba with a magnolia (ucanr.edu/sites/PollenNation/Meet\_The\_Pollinators).

Which pollinator is on the graveyard shift? Bats are on duty! They are extremely necessary, not only for eating pounds of night-flying insects but for pollinating over 300 different types of fruits and night-blooming flowers. They are partial to strong-smelling white flowers such as the night-blooming cereus.

Why do bats “work” at night? Since they are nearly blind, they use echolocation to navigate and find food in the dark. Nighttime’s lighter air traffic and fewer predators mean a higher bat survival rate. Just to make these night flights tempting, night-blooming flowers often have the same alluring and romantic fragrance as the daytime Casa Blanca lily.

Moths are another night-shift pollinator. They have the same landing requirements as the butterflies: a flat landing field. The sphinx moth is quite interesting in that, being small with a long snout, it resembles a hummingbird. The sphinx moth actually makes a humming sound as it hovers mid-air.

Now I’m pondering: are we all just a pollination accident?

Dirty fingernails and all,  
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