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Solar Fields Abloom for Pollinators

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Since the recession, there's been a demand for products that do double duty—something that does both this and that, and this is seen by the consumer as having greater value than something that does just one thing. In our industry, for example, we promote certain edibles as having both culinary and ornamental use, or shade trees as being both landscape elements and shading homes to help keep them cool. You get the idea.

Turns out that solar farms are finding their “and” niche as being locations for solar arrays and fields filled with pollinator-friendly plants. Colleague Jen Polanz turned me on to this Scientific American article about just such a thing—more and more solar farms are converting the otherwise bare or grassy land they sit on into flowering fields sustaining butterflies, bees and all those other pollinators that U.S. agriculture depends on.

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory estimates that up to 6 million acres of land will be converted to solar farms by 2050.

“If we can create some habitat where there wasn't habitat before, like on solar farms, we can likely have a positive impact,” says Cornell University entomologist Scott McArt in the article. Scott partnered with a North Carolina-based solar developer to begin a study to figure out if there's indeed a positive impact on pollinator populations—and if so, how much. They'll compare created habitat against turfgrass and also test different seed mixes.

Consider the fact that wildflower habitat requires less mowing and maintenance (and thus labor) and could also host beehives, and it seems like a pretty good idea. Several of you garden centers out there have solar arrays or are considering them. Maybe you should look into creating a pollinator habitat, too. **GP**