Bybee Lakes Victory Garden is Abuzz with Mason Bees





On a cloudy day at the Bybee Lakes Victory Garden, Dave Hunter of Crown Bees holds out a small bee in his bare hand for the gathering crowd to view. Contrary to the standard concern surrounding bees, he's not worried he'll be stung; this tiny insect is a mason bee.

Mason bees, a solitary bee widely considered safe around children and pets, are also highly efficient pollinators. Mason bees rarely sting, are well-suited for backyards, farms, and gardens, and a single mason bee can pollinate as many plants as 60 to 100 honey bees could. That's why this group has gathered to learn about and place mason bee houses at the Bybee Lakes Victory Garden located at the Bybee Lakes Hope Center, Oregon's largest houseless reentry facility.

Originally planned as a correctional facility, the land Bybee Lakes sits on was transformed in 2020 into a transition center for the houseless. It's also home to VetREST's Victory Garden – a three-acre plot designed as a sanctuary for community and military veterans to foster new skills and find healing while working with the soil. "… the garden is a space to practice patience as you care for a seed that will one day grow into a tomato plant that can produce over 20 lbs of food," says Jacob Ewert, the garden manager at Bybee Lakes. "It is a space where you can watch wild blackbirds forage for seeds on towering sunflowers as they find sustenance from the space you created for them."

Ewert sees the bees as not just a new addition to the garden, but a symbol of hope and healing for participants in the garden. "These mason bees represent a new source of life and energy in the Bybee Lakes Victory Garden," he says. "These bees represent a new opportunity to support your journey of healing." Participation in the garden can provide a

source of purpose and community for a population too often isolated. Bee expert Dave Hunter, whose organization Crown Bees works to sell and increase knowledge of bees, was a natural partner to enlist.

The team has high hopes for the garden this year. A cut flower CSA is being launched to increase awareness and operating revenue to sustain garden operations, including providing food to the kitchen housed within the transitional housing center on the property. The mason bees will be key in raising the quality and quantity of this year's crop, hopefully pollinating the many trees, herbs, vegetable plants, and flowers carefully organized in the garden. Much of the resulting crop is destined for the kitchen at the Hope Center, generating healthy meals for the houseless population sheltered there.



Founded in 2012, **VetREST** is a non-profit organization with a mission to help veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress find peace and community. VetREST takes a multi-pronged approach: the organization provides veterans with peer-led mentorship, valuable farming skills, and meaningful work in generating food for the surrounding community. For more information on VetREST and to view upcoming events at the Bybee Lakes Victory Garden, please visit https://vetrest.org/bybee-lakes-hope-center-victory-garden/.

"We found new teammates with VetREST in Portland," says Hunter. "Their outdoor garden is conscientiously planted, their partnership with the people of neighboring Bybee Lakes Hope Center helps spread solace and connection to nature...the bees are the icing on the cake. We hope their vision continues to flourish!"

VetREST.org

HelpingHandsReentry.org/hope-centers