Promoting the growth of pollinator habitat

By Joshua Baublitz, *Right-of-way program manager*

THERE has been a lot of publicity about pesticides and their various effects on our world lately.

The term pesticide is thrown around quite a bit, and it is a general term that has a stigma attached to it. Some folks contend that pesticides are the primary killer of insects and pollinators, while others claim they can cause cancer.

In this day and age, we use pesticides for everything from keeping warehouses free from rats to keeping ants out of the house. When used properly, pesticides are a convenient and safe way to control many types of pests in many different environments.

Two types of pesticides that people often confuse are insecticides and herbicides. Insecticides control unwanted insects. Herbicides control unwanted plants.

Insecticides are grouped into several different categories. Some, like those commonly used in vegetable gardens, kill on contact. Others are absorbed into plants or used on clothing and take longer to affect the insect.

Insecticides can be used in beneficial ways to control everything from ticks and mosquitos to invasive species like the emerald ash borer and gypsy moths. When used improperly, they can also kill pollinators like honeybees and other beneficial insects. Most utilities only use insecticides against stinging pests like wasps, and only on occasions when these insects pose a direct and immediate threat to workers' safety.

Herbicides help control unwanted weeds and vegetation, and they, too, are organized into several categories based on how they act on plants. There are selective herbicides, which act only on certain types of plants based on their cell structure, and there are non-selective varieties, which will kill all the plants they come into contact with, regardless of species.

Extensive research through Penn State University and other organizations has shown that utilities' use of selective herbicides is very compatible with insect and pollinator habitat.

THE RIGHT WAY: Pollinator plants including daisies, aster, birdsfoot trefoil, buttercup, daisy fleabane and crown vetch flourish on this Claverack right of way along Tamarack Road in Standing Stone Township following the use of herbicide spray targeting taller shrubs such as autumn olive and multi-flora rose. Once established in a right of way, low-growth pollinator species like those shown here help prevent regrowth of taller shrubs and saplings, reducing future right-of-way maintenance costs and allowing for easier access to lines and poles by co-op personnel.

By targeting tall brush, saplings and shrubs for removal on rights of way, utilities can create an open, meadow-like landscape on which low-growing plants and flowers will thrive. Species like aster, coneflower, bee balm, and columbine are then able to fill in the spaces that had previously been shaded out by young trees and brush.

Claverack's vegetation management program seeks to promote pollinator habitat.

Utility corridors require low-growing plants that won't interfere with overhead lines and that allow lineworkers easier access to lines and poles when repairs are needed. Once pollinator species take hold on a given right of way, they naturally inhibit re-growth of shrubs and saplings, which helps reduce future right-of-way management costs.

By selectively targeting incompatible plants like autumn olive and multi-flora rose, we're able to minimize the use of herbicides, encourage pollinator-friendly plants, and remove threats to reliable electric service. We don't spray lawns or active pastures, and we don't target compatible plants like raspberries and goldenrod.

Careful, evidence-based herbicide applications are an essential tool in every utility's management strategy. If you would like to learn more about Claverack's approach to right-of-way management or look into some of the research that is being done in the industry, contact Josh Baublitz at the Claverack main office, 1-800-326-9799, or send an email to joshb@ctenterprises.org.