

Encouraging bumblebees into your garden

Although we hear almost weekly about the decline in the population of the honey bee and Colony Collapse Disorder; the humble bumblebee barely gets a mention, although it is an equally important pollinator. They do not produce honey and are not shipped around in order to pollinate crops, but they too are suffering and declining.

We only currently have 24 species of bumblebee; within the last 70 years, two species have become nationally extinct, with some of these declining, yet it barely makes any news. They deserve conserving in their own right. If they produced honey, you can bet they would be high on the list just as honey bees are! They are major pollinators of the majority of our wild flowers, (something we automatically take for granted) upon which many other species depend and the countryside would be vastly different without these wildflowers.



Photo © Brian Tuohey, www.2eimages.co.uk

Next time you eat a British grown strawberry or a tomato (which depends on bumblebee pollination) or even runner beans, chances are they were not pollinated by a honey bee, but more likely a bumblebee!

It is just a little late now to attract the most species of queen bumblebees to nest in your garden for this year. However, you can make a difference by planting appropriate forage plants for our busy unsung heroes!

Since bumblebee queens must single-handedly feed and incubate their broods in early spring, a good source of forage in close proximity to their selected nest site is likely to be vital. Plants that can provide good spring forage for bumblebees include apple, bluebell, broom, bugle, cherry, spring-flowering heather, flowering currant, pulmonaria, pear, plum, pussy willow, red dead nettle, rosemary, white dead nettle and mahonia.

Whenever I visit a garden centre with plants outside, one of my first observations before purchasing is to note which flowers attracts which species of insects. Many attract both butterflies and bees, although some flowers can only be pollinated by bumblebees, such as foxgloves as only bumbles possess a tongue long enough to gain access to the nectar and hence pollinate the flower.

A good range of forage plants throughout the spring, summer and autumn will allow local bumblebee colonies to thrive producing a greater number of queens which may then increase the number of colonies present the following year. A list of plants, fruits, flowers and vegetables that can provide forage throughout the period of bumblebee activity could include:

March – April

Apple, Bluebell, Broom, Bugle, Cherry, Erica carnea (heather), Flowering currant, Lungwort (Pulmonaria), Pear, Plum, Pussy Willow, Red dead-nettle, Rosemary and White dead-nettle.

May – June

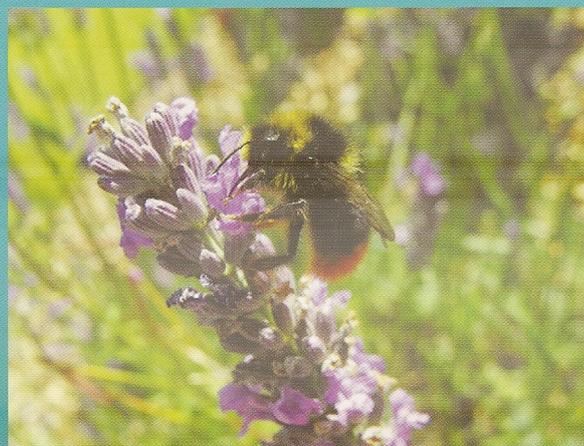
Alliums, Aquilegia, Birds-foot trefoil, Bugle, Bush vetch, Campanula, Ceanothus, Chives, Comfrey, Cotoneaster, Escallonia, Everlasting Pea, Everlasting Wallflower, Foxglove, Geranium, Honeysuckle, Kidney vetch, Laburnum, Lupin, Monkshood, Poached egg plant, Poppies and Raspberries.

July – September

Black horehound, Borage, Bramble, Buddleia, Cardoon, Catmint, Cornflower, Delphinium, Heathers, Hollyhock, Hyssop, Ice plant, Knapweed, Lavender, Lesser burdock, Marjoram, Melilot, Mint, Penstemon, Phacelia, Polemonium, Purple loosestrife, Red bartisia, Red clover, Rock-rose, Runner beans, Sainfoin, Scabious, Sea Holly, Snapdragons, St. John's Wort, Sunflower, Teasel, Thistles, Toadflax, Viper's bugloss and Verbena bonariensis.

George Pilkington.

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Male *Bombus lapidarius*

