

In support of bees

Helen Mount

Anthea Sokell's article about her honeybees in last autumn's *Hardy Plant* spurred me on to do two things. The first was to act on something I had been considering for some time – to see whether my garden was suitable to accommodate a local beekeeper's honeybee hive; it is, and his bees have taken up residence in two hives. The second was to make a note of the (mostly) perennial plants that different bees visit regularly.

So, in 2010–11, I kept a photographic record of my garden plants that were visited by bees at different times of the year. This was by no means intended to be a rigorous scientific study, rather the observations of an amateur with the desire to do something positive about the plight of bees, however little that contribution might be.

I did a little research and found that in addition to the honeybee there are about 20 species of bumblebee and over 200 solitary-bee species. All have an important role to play as pollinators, and it was interesting to find that some solitary and bumblebee species are more effective pollinators than honeybees, working for longer hours during the day and in poorer weather conditions.

There has been increasing concern about the decline in pollinators, particularly in Europe and the USA, in recent years. Around 80% of British plant species (including edible crops) need insects for pollination, and it is estimated that a total loss of pollinators could cost the British economy over £400m a year. Pollination is essential for biodiversity and has implications not only for survival of the plant kingdom but also for the whole food chain.

The decline in different bee populations, some of which have been catastrophic, has been variously attributed to loss of habitat owing to agricultural intensification, pests and diseases, agrochemicals – particularly nicotinoids which disrupt the insects' neurological functions, increasing urbanisation and climate change. Potential solutions have been less forthcoming except for the numerous recommendations to grow more plants to attract bees.



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Hellebore



Kniphofia



Rudbeckia



Sedum

There has been much publicity in various media (and dare I say ‘hype’) about creating wildflower meadows in our gardens as if that would solve the problem. How practical or desirable is that for most people – the majority – who do not have the space or the inclination? Wildflower meadows need a considerable amount of preparation and maintenance to function as nature intended, and many of us do not have the right conditions to start with. I am fortunate indeed to have a garden large enough to leave some grass to grow and for the native wild flowers to flourish, but I see and hear far more bees in the perennial borders than I do in my so-called wild area.

As Hardy Planters we are in a good position to consider growing perennials (as well as other plants) that are effective sources of pollen and nectar for our pollinating insects. From my observations in 2010–11, I started to list the plants that have proven popular with different kinds of bees throughout the year. It is by no means meant to be exhaustive, as it covers only the plants in my own garden. Readers will be aware of many if not all of them.

All varieties of geraniums and of the daisy family proved to be magnets, as did the herbs, but double flowers were generally ignored. Other plants particularly attractive to bees were fruit trees, raspberries and asparagus.

As a final aside, I planted some pink-flowered chives alongside the regular purple ones, and there’s no doubt that the bees preferred the purple; so flower colour appears to have a role to play and novelty is not always the best answer!

After reading my superficial attempt, I hope you will take up the challenge and add to the list from observations in your own garden. This could be the basis of an information sheet on the HPS website giving the best garden plants for pollinators in general and bees in particular. 🐝

Helen Mount gardens about an acre of heavy clay near Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight.

References

- Insect Pollination* – Postnote, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2010) No. 348
Importance of Honey Bees for Sustaining Life on Earth – Sandra Planeuf and Kimberly Feliciano (2007):
 4th Branch of America LLC
The Economic Value of Honeybees – Nick Holland (2009) BBC.co.uk/news
The Importance of Honey Bee Health – Deidre Imus (2011) Fox News
Gardening for Bumblebees – Bumblebee Conservation Trust, Stirling (undated)

Bee-friendly plants in my garden

Bulbs

Allium
Crocospmia
Crocus
Eucomis
Galanthus
Gladiolus
Iris
Lilium
Tulipa

Annuals/Biennials

Cornflower
Cosmos
Digitalis
Echium
Papaver
Verbascum

Shrubs/Subshrubs

Abelia
Buddleja
Callistemon
Caryopteris
Ceanothus
Cistus
Cotoneaster
Cytisus
Deutzia
Erica
Escallonia
Eupatorium
Grevillea
Kolkwitzia
Lavandula
Ligustrum
Lonicera
Ribes
Rosemary
Salix
Thymus

Perennials

Aconite
Aconitum
Aster
Astrantia
Calamintha
Centaurea
Cirsium
Delphinium
Echinacea
Eryngium
Erysimum
Geranium
Heuchera
Helleborus
Helianthemum
Helianthus
Hollyhock
Hyssop
Knautia
Kniphofia
Lamium
Lathyrus
Lythrum
Mentha
Nepeta
Oregano
Osteospermum
Penstemon
Pulmonaria
Rudbeckia
Salvia
Scabious
Sedum
Trifolium
Verbena
Veronica



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Which plants would you add to the list?