

## *How to attract bees to your garden*

Saturday, 11 May 2013

Dave Goulson



We explain some of the best ways to tempt bees into your garden

**\*\* If you want to buy any of the plants mentioned below for your own garden, visit [www.countrylife.co.uk/nursery](http://www.countrylife.co.uk/nursery) and type or copy and paste the name into the search. Plants are delivered in sturdy boxes in a matter of days from one of the finest nurseries in the country. \*\***

My interest in bumblebees and other insects dates back to the age of seven. I didn't much care about school, but I loved our new house and it had a much bigger garden than I was used to. There were large flower borders, apple and damson trees, a pond, two ancient wooden sheds full of cobwebs and vast spiders, and enough room for my father to grow a fine patch of vegetables.

My father wasn't too interested in flowers; he allowed me to plant what I liked, so I put in **lavender**, buddleia and **catmint** to attract bumblebees and butterflies. I trained **honeysuckle** up one of the old sheds to feed moths, and planted a male **pussy willow** to provide the bees with early spring food. I built a large rockery out of old bricks which I scavenged from a dilapidated farm building across the fields, carrying them home in a knapsack. I left spaces at the bottom for the bumblebees to nest in, and planted the top with bird's-foot trefoil to provide flowers for bees and tasty leaves for caterpillars of the common blue butterfly. I dug a bigger pond, and stocked it with newts, stickle-backs and all manner of other beasts from the local canal.

By the following spring, my efforts to encourage wildlife in the garden were really beginning to pay off. I noticed huge queen bumblebees, fresh from hiber-nation, feeding on the pussy willow and lungwort. These bees had been asleep for seven months or so, since the previous July, so the spring feast I had grown for them was particularly welcome.

## *How to attract bees to your garden*

\* [Subscribe to Country Life and save;](#) [Get the Ipad edition](#)

As summer approached, the garden began to swarm with wildlife. The buddleia was covered with small tortoiseshells, peacock butterflies, large and small whites, hoverflies and bumblebees. Pond-skaters and whirligig beetles fought territorial battles on the surface of my new pond, and an emperor dragonfly took up residence, perching on a tall purple loosestrife growing in the pond margin. It would zoom out to catch other flying insects to eat, snatching them mid-air with its bristly legs, and chase away any other dragonflies that tried to move in on its patch. I remain to this day amazed at how quickly wildlife appears in a garden if given just a little encouragement.

Bumblebees are surely among the most gentle and friendly of insects. When visiting flowers in the garden, they are placid and simply fly away if disturbed by a human or another bee. Unlike wasps or honeybees, most bumblebees don't even seem to mind very much if you poke around their nest, stinging only as a last resort. Moreover, they are highly social creatures, with the daughters working together with their mother to look after their young and to gather food. Philosophers and writers from Aristotle and Plato to Shakespeare and Marx have used bee societies as a model example against which humans are regarded as comparing poorly.



Bumblebees seem to be doing pretty well in urban areas compared with the countryside, probably because there tend to be more flowers and nesting opportunities in gardens than in farmland. However, there is plenty of room for improvement.

### *How to attract bees to your garden*

Modern bedding plants have been intensively selected for size and colour, and in so doing have lost their nectar, or become grossly misshapen or oversized so that it is impossible for bees to get the rewards. As an example, the small, delicate wild pansy is popular with bumblebees, while the huge showy blooms of cultivated pansies are ignored. So-called 'F1 hybrids' are often sterile, having no pollen.

'Double' varieties have extra petals, which prevent bees from getting into the flower. For these reasons, most of the busy lizzies, **lobelias**, petunias, **begonias** and so on that are sold in spring to provide an instant splash of colour are more or less useless to bees or butterflies; they have lost their original function, which was to attract pollinators.

In general, old-fashioned cottage-garden perennials are the ones to go for, particularly garden herbs-lupins, **hollyhocks**, **scabious**, **lavender**, chives, sage, thyme and rosemary and so on. Most are easy to grow and low maintenance so they are well suited to busy modern lifestyles. They are also beautiful; a wildlife-friendly garden does not have to be a chaotic mass of nettles and brambles.

*Dave Goulson is Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Sussex and founder of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust ([www.bumblebeeconservation.org](http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org)). Extracted from 'A Sting in the Tale', by Dave Goulson, published last month by Jonathan Cape (£16.99)*

The NGO Educational Trust wishes to thank the Country Life for permitting us to reproduce this article for the benefit of our website users.