

Bumblebee Aware - September 2021

Have you noticed that the ivy is beginning to flower? There are already plenty of bees drinking the nectar and you can hear the bushes from quite a distance. Most of these are honeybees or a species of solitary bee (*Colletes hederæ*) that specialises in ivy, but there are only a few bumbles to be seen among them, probably because bumblebees are outnumbered. Bumblebee populations are declining now as this year's workers, the old queens and the males, are dying off, but the new queens are desperately feeding up so that they will survive hibernation until next spring.

We have a vital role to play by growing masses of plants bearing pollen and nectar in gardens where insecticides are never used, of course. Bumblebees also need safe niches to hide in, but it is difficult to help them in their search. For millions of years they have been doing this for themselves so we need not worry too much about this aspect of their survival, but leaving some untidy corners in your garden will help.



The colonies of some bumblebee species live longer than others and there are still many Common carder (*Bombus pascuorum*) bees around. These beauties have thick ginger hair on the thorax and similar sparser hair on the abdomen. They are known to nest in tussocky grass rather than underground like all but one of the UK bumblebees, but we have no idea where they hide in the winter. They are still busily gathering pollen and nectar from Salvia, Nasturtium, Caryopteris, Scabious, Dahlia and other plants that flower in late summer. Foraging will continue until the first severe frost kills the more tender plants.

One of the challenges of setting up a floral resource for pollinators, apart from the need for on-going maintenance, is to keep it looking attractive in the winter when most plants have died down. Areas of dead plants really upset some people and they will be vocal in calling for "Wildflower meadows" to be banned. One answer is to plant species that are green at this time of year, whether evergreen perennials like Hellebore, White dead nettle, Comfrey, and **Green alkanet**, or shrubs like Abelia, Mahonia, Gorse and Winter honeysuckle. After Christmas, the presence of Primrose, Daffodil, Crocus, and Pussy willow will make the site attractive to pollinators and humans. They do not have to be "Native" plants, and "Wildflowers", if our intention is to maximise our support for pollinators rather than to maintain the status quo (which policy is clearly failing to save many species from extinction). We need to greatly increase what our local habitats have to offer, and we need to do it quickly.



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