

Bumblebee Aware May 2019

This month finds us with all sorts of pollinators foraging in our gardens or looking for supplies of nectar and pollen. During May and June, one of the super-plants for bumblebees is Cotoneaster simonsii, the evergreen one with the small leaves, and it is a magnet for several species. You will see the large queen bumblebees as well as some of the smaller workers who are the first of this year's families. The advantage that shrubs have over annual and perennial plants is that they do not have to be replaced each year and they almost look after themselves. In an ideal world (for pollinators) we would make sure that all the shrubs we grow actually do provide the food that bees need.



Flowering plants and bumblebees evolved in parallel over a period of 130 million years because the insects represented a much more efficient way of transferring pollen from one plant to another than just relying on the wind to do it. For the bees it meant that they became vegetarian, having evolved from carnivorous wasps, and could rely on nectar to give them energy and pollen to supply protein.

Pollen varies in its quality depending on which flower it comes from. Dandelions produce pollen that lacks certain important constituents and bees need to visit a range of plants to gather the components that they need to build their bodies. The greatest amounts of pollen come from the Poppy, Malva and Knapweed but the best quality pollen comes from Vipers bugloss and Californian poppy which both contain more than 40% protein, the equivalent of prime beef. Pollen is also a source of essential minerals. Some flowers produce lots of pollen but little nectar, and vice versa so bees need to visit a range of blooms. These wild flowers are not blooming yet and so the early bees are still relying on us.

Nectar is the essential food that provides bees with their energy. It contains various sugars but is mainly water, much of which the bee removes while the nectar is being carried back to the nest, in its honey stomach. There are big differences in the quantity and quality of nectar that flowers produce with Ragwort, Thistle and Cornflower being among the best. Although honeybees have been farmed for honey production for thousands of years, bumblebees make only enough honey to supply their own larvae and adults for the current season.



Bumblebees need to visit a range of flowers to collect the complete set of foods that they need to build and maintain a healthy colony. This underlines the important role that we have as gardeners in the Maidenhead area to make sure that we provide the optimum range of flowers throughout the year.

You can always keep up to date with information about identification and monitoring of bumblebees, and of which flowers will be best for your garden, by looking at the www.bumblebeeconservation.org.uk website. It also suggests many ways that you can get involved to help our bees.

If you find a bumblebee nest in your garden then you can take part in your own survey using the form supplied by Trevor Smith who has been monitoring bees in the Maidenhead area for many years, which can be downloaded from the Bees page on the Wild Maidenhead website. You can also contact Trevor via trevorbugsmith@gmail.com .

If you have any questions about our local bumblebees, you can always e-mail me on: buzz@bumblebee.myzen.co.uk and I will do my best to answer them.

Adrian Doble (15 May 2019) (Member and volunteer with Bumblebee Conservation Trust)