

A cool drink in the shade

We are now in the middle of summer and the temperatures have already reached comfortable heights although it is not so pleasant if you are doing physical work. Many bumblebee queens are in the nest incubating eggs in a shaded part of a garden somewhere in the Thames Valley while their workers are constantly busy collecting nectar and pollen. Flying produces a lot of heat and it is not always easy for a bee, who evolved in the Himalayas, to keep herself cool enough to avoid damage to her own tissues. On the hottest days she takes a siesta in the shade, but she needs water to survive if she is to avoid exhaustion.

Some gardens have a swimming pool or a paddling pool while others may contain a pond or a bird bath. You might think that these facilities are perfect for pollinators, but this is only true if they can be approached by a shallow slope. In most cases, an insect that drops in for a drink cannot take off and so buzzes around in circles until it drowns. Bees that do end up in the pond can often be saved with the help of a tea strainer on the end of a bamboo cane. A soggy bee can be put on a piece of towel-roll to help her dry out.



A better idea is to use a glazed terracotta saucer from a Garden Centre and add a selection of stones to provide islands with sloping sides for when the water level varies. This is good for birds too if placed in a suitably sheltered position and raised so cats and dogs don't use it. A clean block of wood floating in a swimming pool or pond also works well as an island.



Bumblebees that become exhausted do need our help. In many cases they can be saved with an offering of sugared water (not honey). The procedure is to place the bee on a flat surface. Transfer a drop of water to a spot just in front of her head, add a few grains of sugar, stir it with a tooth-pick and then draw a bead of the solution to her tongue. Don't drown the poor creature or gum up her legs in the process. Soon you may see her long tongue sweeping the life-saving fluid into her mouth. She will probably revive in half an hour and then take off, leaving you feeling like a total hero!

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