

Bumblebee Aware February 2020

It is wonderful to know that the days are getting longer, the sun is getting braver, and nature is well ahead with plans to spread leaves wherever the light can reach. Bumblebee queens are out and about, flying low over the ground as they search for nest sites amongst the litter of dead leaves and twigs. They are desperate to find pollen and nectar to rebuild their bodies after many months of hibernation. Will they find any in your garden?

One of these will be this month's featured pollinator, the Garden bumblebee (*Bombus hortorum*). She can be identified by the three yellow bands on her otherwise black body, one at the front of her thorax, one at the back of her thorax and one at the front of her abdomen. Her tail is white. Her brood is relatively small, numbering up to 150, and they start to appear in April. The queen will have started laying her eggs six weeks earlier in an underground burrow, ideally in an old mouse nest.



Her special claim to fame is her long face and tongue and these allow her to feed on plants that other bees such as honeybees and solitary species cannot reach. Crops like beans and clover have long narrow flowers that rely on the Garden bumbles for pollination otherwise the yields are considerably lower and seeds do not form. There used to be plenty of red clover growing in meadows but that is no longer the case and long-tongued species are suffering a decline as a result.

Amongst the most useful wildflowers that we can grow is the White dead nettle. This does



not sting, grows nearly anywhere, has deep flowers like bean plants, and blooms almost throughout the year. Yellow archangel is an early version of the same thing. Similar deep flowers that we can grow in our gardens include Salvias, large Lobelias, Snapdragons, Delphiniums and Foxgloves.



Tidy gardens are not ideal for wildlife because nature prefers a fuzzy area between trees and grass that is ideal for small creeping and crawling animals. Here they can come and go in safety as they search for food, friendship, and housing. We can create this habitat by widening the base of hedges with low shrubs like Rosemary, Heather, Thyme and Sage, as well as by adding sticks, twigs and leaves. Eventually bumblebees may choose to nest in this sort of environment, but other insects and small rodents may use this cover.

Adrian Doble (Bumblebee Conservation Trust) February 2020