

Help the humble bumblebee

There are easy ways you can help bumblebees, which are under threat. Smallholder and environmentalist Penny Bunting explains

We're always looking for ways to improve biodiversity on our smallholding, and one of our favourite wildlife-friendly projects last year was the creation of a nectar-rich garden for bees and butterflies. It's well known that bees and bumblebees are vital for pollination of many crops, so we chose a sunny site alongside the greenhouse for our insect feeding station and got planting. Scabious, sedums and lavender were included and, by mid-summer, we had a border full of colourful blooms teeming with bees, bumblebees, butterflies and hoverflies.

British bumblebee populations have taken a real battering in the past 80 years, according to the Bumblebee Conservation Trust (www.bumblebeeconservation.org), with two species becoming nationally extinct and several others under serious threat.

We rely on the contribution of bumblebees to pollinate a range of commercial crops – strawberries, apples, tomatoes and peas, for example. Without these amazing insects helping out on UK farms and smallholdings, the cost of some fruit and vegetables could rocket, as farmers are forced to find less cost-effective means of pollination.

So it makes sense to do all we can to help the humble bumblebee. One of the best ways to help is to provide food: planting the right shrubs, perennials and annuals to offer a constant supply of nectar from early spring to late autumn will attract bumblebees and all sorts of other beneficial insects to your plot.

Bumblebees adore old-fashioned cottage garden flowers that are easy to grow and give striking splashes of colour in the garden. Foxgloves, sweet peas, honeysuckle and hollyhocks are all appealing.

Buddleia is so well loved by butterflies that it is often referred to as 'the butterfly bush' – but bees and bumblebees love it too. It will grow almost anywhere, meaning a bush or two can be tucked into any otherwise unproductive areas of the smallholding. With a range of colours including purple, yellow and white it can make even the untidiest corner more attractive – and butterflies such as peacock and painted lady will flit around it all summer.

Bumblebees are often the first insects to emerge after hibernation in early spring. Unlike honeybees, they don't keep a winter food store, so they're really ready for a snack when they wake up!

Early flowering nectar-rich plants such as snowdrops, grape hyacinths and crocuses offer a tasty breakfast for bees. Honesty, viburnum and mahonia also flower quite early in the year, so are useful choices for a bee-friendly garden.

In summer, hardy annuals such as candytuft, nasturtiums and Californian poppies are an inexpensive option. Just a few packets of seed will produce flowers that self-seed, for years of colourful, nectar-



Bumblebee on lavender



Bee on snowdrop



Painted Lady on buddleia

rich blooms.

By including some later flowering perennials such as Michaelmas daisies and sedums, you can provide insects with food for much of the year.

But a nectar-rich garden doesn't just have to provide food for bees and butterflies – smallholders can benefit, too. Many classic kitchen garden herbs such as rosemary, sage, thyme, chives and borage will attract pollinating insects in droves.

And if you position your nectar-rich garden alongside your fruit garden, you could increase your chances of a bumper crop. Pollinating insects will be attracted by the bright blooms, then proceed to visit your raspberry, strawberry and blackcurrant flowers to work their magic.

With this in mind, we tucked strawberry plants into every available space in our nectar-rich garden. We happily watched bumblebees buzzing from flower to flower – and come mid-summer enjoyed bowlfuls of juicy red strawberries with cream. Thanks, bees!

Penny Bunting is a smallholder and writer living in the Peak District. She also runs award-winning environmental project Little Green Space (www.littlegreenspace.org.uk).