Garden Bumblebees

Attracting bumblebees and making artificial bumblebee nest sites in the garden

Bumblebees are insects of temperate climates. Quite different from honey bees and solitary bees, they live in small colonies of up to 200-300 and with their densely furry bodies can be active even in dull conditions. They are constantly busy in the garden, foraging for nectar and pollen, helping to pollinate flowers as they do so.

Up to 25 species of bumblebee live in the UK. Many are found only in habitats such as moorland or in coastal areas; only 6 or 7 species are widespread and visit gardens. There are also 6 species of 'cuckoo' bumblebees, that mimic other species and take over their nests.

In the last 30 years, two bumblebee species are known to have become extinct in this country, and many more have suffered a marked decline.

This factsheet suggests flowers and planting schemes to attract bumblebees, and shows how you can make special homes for them in your garden.

Seven species you might meet in the garden

Workers hatched early in the year are much smaller than later siblings.

Bombus terrestris

White-tailed

Bombus terrestris Buff-tailed bumblebee. 'Tail' quite variable white-yellow. BIG! Flying from June-October

Bombus hortorum

Bombus hortorum 'Garden' bumblebee. White-tailed, with extra yellow stripe on Its abdomen. Medium sized. Flying May-October

Bombus lucorum

Bombus lucorum White-tailed with no extra yellow stripe. Medium sized. Flying from April-September

Red-tailed

Bombus lapidarius Red-tailed bumblebee. All black body with red tail. BIG! Flying from April-September

Bombus pratorum Yellow striped with orange-red tail. Small sized. Flying from April-August

Brown

Bombus pascuorum 'Carder' bee. No stripes, usually all brown, but quite variable. Small sized.Flying June-October

Bombus lapidarius

Bombus pratorum

Bombus pascuorum

Bee watchful ... Observing a year in the life of a bumblebee colony

1. Early spring - Solitary queen bees emerge from hibernation. These are the large bumblebees seen during February - March.

2. Queen bees look for a likely nest site such as an old mouse nest or grassy tussock, familiarising herself with the area.

3. In the nest the queen lays her eggs, having kept them throughout the winter. The first workers emerge, more eggs are laid and hatch until colony numbers reach 200-300. Some eggs develop into new queen bumblebees.

4. The first unfertilised eggs are laid and these develop into male bumblebees.

5. New queens and males leave the nest. Males patrol a chosen 'patch', leaving scent marks and looking for queens to mate with.

6. Autumn - Original queen bee, workers and males die. New queens, with their fertilised eggs go into hibernation.

Flight of the bumblebee

Flying takes up a lot of energy - a third of a bumblebee's daily energy intake is spent foraging for more nectar and pollen. By repeatedly 'shivering' their muscles and with their furry 'woolly jumper'-like bodies, bumblebees can stay warm and active on cool overcast days. Some bumblebees even live north of the Arctic Circle!

A stinging comment

The sting is modified ovipositor (egg laying tube) and so present only in the female bumblebees. They very rarely sting, even when handled, but may do so if the entrance to their nest is obstructed. Unlike honey bees, stinging is not fatal for a bumblebee - she can fly away and sting again another day.

Planting for bees

Early and late flowers, together with some bee favourites, will give a long supply of nectar. By planting in dense drifts; bees learn to recognise certain nectar - and will revisit these repeatedly, rewarding the flowers. Some bees have preferences for certain flower forms.

Bombus terrestris and Bombus lucorum - bees prefer short open flowers e.g White Clover, Comfrey, Field Bean. Both are hole-biting 'nectar robbers' (see below.) Bombus terrestris rarely visit pendulous flowers as its large size means it is not agile enough to so.

Bombus hortorum - bees have a long tongue so they can visit flowers with petals that form long tubes such as Honeysuckle, Delphiniums and Catmint.

Bombus lapidarius - bees are another large bee which likes to land on flowers with 'platforms' e.g. Daisy family, especially Knapweeds.

Bombus pratorum - bees are a small agile size with a medium-length tongue that means it can probe a range of flower depths and is able to visit upside-down and drooping flowers such as Comfrey and Bugloss.

Bombus pascuorum - bees are long-tongued, ideal for long-tubed flowers, especially late flowers of White deadnettle, but also visits a wide variety of flowers. Male bees seem to visit compound daisy-like flowers (e.g Marsh Thistle) more than females.

30 Plants popular with bumblebees:

Betony	Bugle	Alkanet
Comfrey	Clovers	Buddleia
Field Bean	Foxglove	Knapweed
Thistles	Lavender	Viper s Bugloss
Verbascums	Woundworts	White Deadnettle
Chives	Borage	Single Larkspurs
Nasturium	Rosemary	Poached Egg plant
Catmint	Toadflax	Figwort
Marjoram	Curry plant	Snapdragon
Sage and mints	Cranesbills	Agastache

Early Flowers

Bluebells	Primrose
Dandelion	White Deadnettle
Aubretia	Wallflower
Single Crocus	Flowering currant
Hazel	Forget-me-not
Pussy willow	Winter Heather

Late Flowers

Michaelmas daisies	Ivy
Buddleia	Goldenrod
Sedum	Lavender
Escallonia	Echinacea
Ceanothus	Red Valerian

A Living Landscape

Our gardens represent a vast living landscape; and with an estimated 16 million gardens in the UK, the way they are managed can made a big difference to wildlife.
Across gardens and beyond, The Wildlife Trusts' vision to create A Living Landscape involves enlarging, improving and joining-up areas of wildlife-rich land in all parts of the UK. There are now over 100 inspirational Living Landscape schemes around the UK, rich in opportunities for sustainability, learning, better health and wellbeing. What is good for wildlife is good for people too.

For more information go to **www.wildlifetrusts.org**

Making a bumblebee nest for the garden

Building a bumblebee box

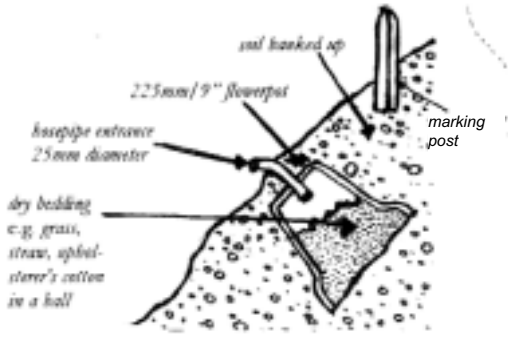
Build a 100mm x 100mm x 200mm box with a lid, from wood. Cut an entrance hole at the bottom of the box.

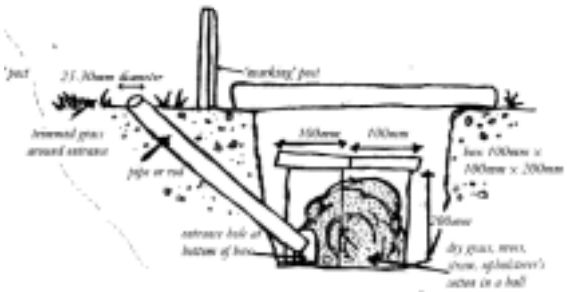
By the end of April, dig a hole in a dry, well drained spot and place the box inside.

Force a rod or pipe (25-30mm wide) into the ground so that it meets up with the entrance hole.

Place bedding material such as dry grass, straw, or upholsterer's cotton (but not cotton wool) in the box, close the lid and cover over with turf, logs or a paving stone.

Plant a 10cm tall stick upright nearby as a 'marking post' to help bees find their way back to the nest.





In a clay flower pot

By the end of April, half bury a 9"/225mm deep clay flowerpot in a dry, well drained, sheltered, sunny flowerbed or hedge

bottom so that the drainage hole in the base faces outwards.

Attach a short 5-6cm length of hosepipe (25-30 mm wide) to the drainage hole.

Add some bedding material such as pets' bedding, dry grass, straw, or upholsterer's cotton (not cotton wool.)

Cover over the rest of the pot with soil or vegetation so that the pipe sticks out. Plant a 10cm tall stick upright nearby - bees may use this as a 'marking post' to help them find their way back to the nest.

Winter hibernation spots

In late summer the colony's new Queen bees need to find themselves somewhere to hibernate. They dig themselves a shallow subterranean chamber in which to stay until the following spring. This is often dug into loose soil in a cool north facing bank. Try providing places like this for hibernating Queen bumblebees in your garden in quiet, undisturbed spots.

Your contact details here

Flight of the bumblebee
Bumblebee buzz is generated by air forced out through breathing holes in the bee's abdomen - a bit like humming through your nose!

AVAILABLE IN OTHER FORMATS

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