

How to: Improve your garden for bees and other pollinators



Pollinator friendly allotment Photo: David Perkins



Marc Carlton's pollinator garden Photo: Steve Head

Pollinators will always visit gardens with flowers whatever we do. However, you can make your garden better for them by considering the breeding and behaviour of the various groups, as well as providing suitable plants and garden features. It's particularly important to have a rich mix of pollinators if you grow your own food so improving your garden for pollinators will be advantageous as well as interesting.

Target species:

We have 270 species of bees, including 247 solitary bees, 27 bumblebee species, and the semi-domesticated honey bee. We see 21 species of [butterflies](#) commonly in gardens, and hundreds of [moths](#). There are about 100 species of [hoverflies](#) likely to be found in gardens.

Of these groups the bees are key pollinators as they have evolved to use pollen as larval food and have many adaptations to collect it, and many plants are adapted to optimize pollination. Flies and beetles can be as important due to their diversity and relative abundance. Butterflies and moths are diverse in terms of species and very attractive in the garden. Butterflies are having a bad time just now: perhaps all the more reason to 'garden for butterflies'.



Photo: Caroline Harcourt

How to do it

- Respect your "weeds" for many are attractive to bees and others - for example green alkanet *Pentaglottis sempervirens*, black horehound *Ballota nigra*, white dead nettle *Lamium album* and bramble *Rubus fruticosus*. Even hedge bindweed *Calystegia sepium* is loved by bumbles but allow it too much leeway and you won't end up with much else. Dandelions *Taraxacum* species are excellent nectar and pollen plants for early spring, so "Love Your Dandelions"

- Grow lots of plants from our lists, that we know are very good for pollinators
- Plant clumps of a modest number of species, rather than single specimens of lots of species
- Plant a range of flowers from our lists that blossom throughout the year, early spring and autumn sources are particularly important to help populations survive the winter.
- Provide a water source, which honeybees need to air-condition their hives
- Remember while bees only need flowers, butterflies, moths, flies and beetles may need different plants or habitats for their larval stages – see our other guides
- Bumblebees need quiet areas with good ground cover to nest such as tussock grass, log piles, rockeries or dry-stone walls.
- Solitary bees need nest sites (holes in posts/bee ‘hotels’, bare soil on sunny banks, thick grass clumps and undisturbed cover in
- Provide undisturbed over-wintering sites for eg bumblebee queens, lepidopteran adults and larvae/pupae. Climbing ivy is excellent.
- Make your lawn more pollinator friendly – see our lawn and meadow guides

How easy is it to do?

Easy! it’s all about adapting your garden planting and habitats to suit pollinators rather than making big changes. You don’t have to do everything at once, start with one area and do more next year.

How much will it cost?

Respecting “weeds” is free! Seeds generally cost between £1 and £3 per packet, with old garden favourites near the bottom end, and wildflower or special hybrid seeds generally more expensive. £10 will set you up with seed compost and seed trays. Buying plants from most garden centres averages £6-£8 per plant, but they are ready to put in your garden. Mail order firms sell multiples of young plants as plugs or in modules, and these are much cheaper especially if you spread postage across a big order.

Your neighbours or garden-club friends can often supply plants or rooted cuttings for nothing, and you can in turn pass on any surplus. The main expense providing habitats is elbow grease. You shouldn’t need to spend money on expensive nest boxes.

How effective is it for the target species?

Effective extending to Very Effective with the more you can do.

Golden rules – what the science tells us



- Avoid double-flowered/multi-petaled or “flore pleno” cultivars that have little or no pollen or nectar like this snowdrop. Attractive to some, but has nothing for pollinators

Photo: Dezidor via Wikimedia Commons

- The more flowers a plant carries the better for pollinators. Many horticultural varieties score higher than native species in this.
- Insects fly at different times of year, and plants flower in different months, so use our lists to get some forage at all times of the year
- Large patches of flowers are labour-saving for pollinators
- Flowering trees, eg fruit trees are excellent sources of food for pollinators as well as you
- Some specialist bees need one special species eg white bryony for Bryony mining bee *Andrena florea*, ivy for Ivy bee *Colletes hederæ*
- Butterflies and moths need larval food plants, so see our lists.

What to look for?

- Look out for insects using your “weeds” - self-seeding native plants. Tolerate them, and learn to recognise them as seedlings to protect them with selective weeding.
- See how different pollinators use different groups of plants. Hoverflies, butterflies and short-tongued bee species use flowers with ‘shallow’ nectaries such as members of the Compositae - fleabanes, daisies, marigolds, yarrows, ragworts. Long-tongued bees use plants with deeper nectaries such as the Labiatae - mints, deadnettles, sages, horehounds, and woundworts.

Things to be aware of

- Do not use pesticides in your garden!
- Annual seeds will provide near instant colour and insect food, but then die. Perennials take a year to get going, but then last for years, so are better long term value.
- You get lots of seeds in a packet, so you can supply your own and your friends’ gardens from one pack

Further information

See other WLGF ‘How to...’ pages:

How to: Create and maintain a [bee hotel](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_bee_hotel.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_bee_hotel.pdf

How to: Improve your garden for [butterflies and moths](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_butterflies.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_butterflies.pdf

How to: Create a [wildlife-friendly lawn](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_improve_lawn.pdf

How to: Create and manage a [wildflower meadow](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_meadow.pdf

How to: Grow wildlife-friendly [plants from seed](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_seeds.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_seeds.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [winter and early spring](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_winter.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_winter.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [late spring and early summer](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_spring.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_spring.pdf

How to: Choose pollinator plants for [late summer and autumn](http://www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_summer.pdf) www.wlgf.org/ht_plants_summer.pdf

Our website

Plants for [pollinators](http://wlgf.org/plants_pollinators.html) wlgf.org/plants_pollinators.html (and leaflets)

Plants for [herbivores](http://wlgf.org/plants_herbivores.html) wlgf.org/plants_herbivores.html

[Butterflies](http://www.wlgf.org/butterflies.html) www.wlgf.org/butterflies.html

[Moths](http://www.wlgf.org/moths_intro.html) www.wlgf.org/moths_intro.html

[Bumblebees](http://www.wlgf.org/bumblebees.html) www.wlgf.org/bumblebees.html

[Solitary bees](http://www.wlgf.org/solitary_bees.html) www.wlgf.org/solitary_bees.html

[Honeybee](http://www.wlgf.org/honeybee.html) www.wlgf.org/honeybee.html

[Hoverflies](http://www.wlgf.org/hoverflies.html) www.wlgf.org/hoverflies.html

Marc Carlton’s [The Pollinator Garden](http://www.foxleas.com) www.foxleas.com: lots of great advice.

Books

Jeff Ollerton (2021) **Pollinators and Pollination: Nature and Society** (Pelagic): a very readable and detailed discussion of the nature of pollinators, their role in ecosystems, in our gardens and lives.

Kirk and Howes (2012) **Plants for Bees** IBRA: gives detailed coverage of the value of a very good range of both native and non-native garden plants for bees, solitary and social.