Bee Friendly Plants UK (Bees, Butterflies, Wildflowers)

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The best bee friendly plants for UK gardens are single, open-faced flowers that bloom across as much of the year as possible: lavender, borage, catmint, foxgloves and hardy geraniums for the main season, hellebores and pulmonaria for the hungry early spring, and ivy and sedum for autumn. Skip the frilly double-flowered varieties, because they carry little or no nectar and bees often cannot reach in. Add a patch of wildflowers, stop spraying, and let a corner of the lawn flower, and you will have more bees than your neighbours within a season. If you grow vegetables, this is not just charity: more pollinators means bigger harvests of courgettes, beans, pumpkins and fruit.

Why This Matters More If You Grow Vegetables

Pollinator planting gets talked about as a wildlife good deed, and it is one, but for anyone growing food it is straightforwardly practical. Courgettes, pumpkins, squash, cucumbers, beans, strawberries, raspberries, apples and plums all crop better, or in some cases only crop at all, when insects move pollen for them. If you have ever had plants that flower but produce no crop, poor pollination is one of the usual suspects, especially in a cold or wet summer when insects are not flying much. A garden full of bees is a garden with heavier trusses and fuller beds. The flowers pay for themselves in vegetables.

The Four Rules That Matter More Than the Plant List

If you cannot see into the middle of the flower, neither can a bee.

Before any shopping list, get the principles right, because they do more work than any single plant choice. First, flower across the whole season. Bees are on the wing from February to November in a mild year, and most gardens are a feast in June and a desert in March and October. Filling those two gaps helps more than adding another summer flower. Second, choose single, open flowers. Double-flowered varieties, the frilly many-petalled dahlias, roses and bedding, have often been bred until the nectar is gone or buried where no bee can reach it. If you cannot see the middle of the flower, neither can a bee. Third, mix native and non-native. RHS research found the total number of flowers matters more than their origin, with a bias toward natives and other northern hemisphere plants and a few exotics to extend the season. Fourth, never spray anything in flower, and ideally do not spray at all. Insecticides kill the pollinators you are trying to attract, and even some products sold as natural are harmful to bees.

The Plants That Actually Work

The March gap matters more than another summer flower: crocus, hellebores and pulmonaria feed queens when nothing else is out.

For the main season, my shortlist after twenty years is boringly reliable: lavender, which is smothered in bumblebees from June, borage, which self-seeds cheerfully and which honeybees adore, catmint, hardy geraniums, foxgloves for the long-tongued bumblebees, and single-flowered marigolds and cosmos to keep going until the frosts. Herbs are the unsung heroes here: let a few plants of thyme, oregano, chives and mint flower rather than cutting them all back, and they will out-perform most bedding for insect traffic. That is a genuinely free win, since you are already growing them, and it is one of the arguments I make in growing herbs.

The gaps matter more than the middle. For late winter and early spring, when queen bumblebees emerge starving and there is almost nothing out, plant hellebores, pulmonaria, crocus and grape hyacinth, and leave the dandelions alone, because they are one of the most valuable early nectar sources there is. For autumn, sedum (now Hylotelephium), Michaelmas daisies, single dahlias and above all ivy, which flowers in October when nearly everything else has finished and which is worth its weight in gold to late bees. For butterflies specifically, buddleja earns its reputation, but pair it with marjoram, verbena bonariensis, knapweed and a patch of nettles left in a corner, because several of our prettiest butterflies can only lay their eggs on nettles. A butterfly garden with no caterpillar food is a service station without a kitchen.

Wildflower Seed: The Cheapest Way to Start

A single packet along a sunny strip does more for pollinators than a trolley of bedding plants.

If you want the biggest change for the least money and effort, sow wildflowers. A single packet scattered across a sunny strip does more for pollinators than a trolley of bedding plants, and it costs a fraction as much. Wildflower seed mixes come as annual mixes, which flower spectacularly in their first summer and want re-sowing, and perennial or native meadow mixes, which take a year to get going but then return. My advice for a first attempt is an annual mix along a border edge or in a spare bed, because the instant results keep you interested, then add a perennial patch once you have seen what a difference it makes.

Two honest warnings, because wildflower patches fail more often than the packet pictures suggest. They need poor soil and full sun: sow a meadow mix into rich, well-fed vegetable ground and the grasses and vigorous weeds will swamp the flowers within weeks. Strip the turf, rake to bare soil, do not add compost, and resist feeding it. And clear the ground properly first, because scattering seed onto existing grass almost never works, which is the single most common reason people conclude wildflowers are not for them. If you are going meadow rather than border, sow yellow rattle with it, a semi-parasitic native that weakens grasses and lets the flowers compete. Autumn or early spring sowing both work; autumn suits perennial natives better.

Everything That Is Not a Plant

Bees drown in open water: pebbles give them somewhere to stand.

Planting is most of the job but not all of it. Give bees water: a shallow saucer with pebbles or gravel to stand on, topped up and refreshed, saves a surprising number of exhausted insects, and they do drown in open water without a landing spot. Leave a patch of bare, sunny soil undisturbed, because most of our 270-odd UK bee species are solitary and many nest in the ground rather than in hives. Mow less, and let clover, dandelions and self-heal flower in part of the lawn, which is the laziest and most effective thing on this entire list. Leave stems and seedheads standing over winter instead of tidying everything in autumn, since they shelter overwintering insects, and a no dig approach helps too by leaving the soil and everything living in it undisturbed. Bee hotels are fine and fun with children, but keep them small, dry and cleaned between years, because a neglected one turns into a disease trap and does more harm than good.

A Realistic First Year

You do not need to redesign the garden. In year one, pick a sunny two-metre strip you are not using and sow an annual wildflower mix in spring. Put in one lavender and one catmint somewhere warm. Let a few herbs flower instead of cutting them all. Buy a handful of crocus and hellebores in autumn to cover the spring gap. Stop spraying, put out a pebble saucer, and mow one corner of the lawn less often. That is a weekend of work and perhaps twenty pounds, and by the following July you will notice the difference standing still with your eyes shut, which is exactly how I first noticed mine. The vegetables noticed sooner than I did.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the best plant to attract bees in the UK?

Lavender is the most reliable single choice for a UK garden: it flowers for weeks, thrives in poor soil and sun, and bumblebees cover it. Borage is the best value from seed and honeybees adore it.

When should I sow wildflower seeds in the UK?

Either autumn (September to October) or spring (March to May). Autumn sowing suits native perennial and meadow mixes, which need a cold period and get a head start the following year. Spring suits annual mixes that flower the same summer. Both need bare, cleared soil rather than being scattered onto existing grass.

Do wildflowers need good soil?

No, and rich soil is actually the usual reason wildflower patches fail. Most native wildflowers evolved on poor ground and get out-competed by grasses and vigorous weeds where the soil is fertile. Do not add compost or fertiliser, strip the turf back to bare soil, and choose the sunniest, hungriest spot you have.

What flowers should I avoid if I want to help bees?

Avoid double-flowered varieties: the frilly, many-petalled dahlias, roses, begonias and bedding plants. Breeding for extra petals often removes the nectar entirely or buries it where bees cannot reach. If you cannot see into the centre of the flower, it is unlikely to be much use. Stick to single, open-faced flowers.

For a fuller answer, plant several things that flower at different times rather than a lot of one thing, because the gaps in early spring and autumn are where most gardens let pollinators down. is refinement. Do those few things and the garden will sound different by next summer, and if you grow vegetables, it will feed you better too.

Will attracting bees improve my vegetable harvest?

Yes, noticeably, for insect-pollinated crops. Courgettes, pumpkins, squash, cucumbers, runner beans, strawberries, raspberries and top fruit all crop better with plenty of pollinators about. Poor pollination is a common cause of plants that flower well but set little fruit, particularly in cold or wet summers when insects fly less.

Are bee hotels a good idea?

They can be, if you keep them small, mount them in a dry sunny spot, and clean or replace the tubes each year. Large neglected bee hotels accumulate parasites and disease and can do more harm than good. A sunny patch of undisturbed bare soil costs nothing and helps the many solitary bee species that nest in the ground rather than in tubes.

A Sensible Place to Start

Start with the strip and the season, not the shopping list. Clear a sunny patch of bare soil, sow an annual wildflower mix in it, and plant one lavender nearby. Then look honestly at what your garden offers in March and in October, and fill those two gaps with crocus, hellebores, sedum and ivy. Let some herbs flower, leave the dandelions in one corner of the lawn, put out a saucer of water with pebbles in it, and stop spraying. Everything else on this page

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenteering and best wishes,

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