

The holly, the ivy, and the mistletoe

The traditional greenery of Christmas may have 'decked your halls' during the festive season. Our native holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) is dioecious, i.e. it has separate male and female trees, which require pollination by insects. Flowers on the male tree contain the pollen which fertilises the flowers on the female tree to produce the red berries which we prize so much at this time of year. Not only us, of course, birds love them too, and holly trees also provide shelter for them, and a place for hedgehogs to hibernate.

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) is also dioecious, so both male and female plants must be present in mistletoe populations, with pollination by insects to produce the white berries on the female plant. These are then eaten by birds, who disperse the sticky seeds, often by wiping them on tree branches where they can germinate. I have a healthy crop of mistletoe on an old apple tree, and look forward to seeing the large mistle thrush each year, taking its fill of the berries and usually leaving some for me! However, according to Worcestershire Orchards' website, it is the blackcap which is the best disperser of mistletoe seeds, as it is the species which typically wipes its bill clean whilst feeding.



A buff-tailed bumblebee (photograph courtesy of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust)

Pollinator plant of the month

Mahonia (*Mahonia japonica*), a medium-sized evergreen shrub, is as tough as old boots, and produces sprays of small fragrant yellow flowers from late autumn until early spring, making it a welcome food source for winter-active bumblebees. The Bumblebee Conservation Trust reports that queens and workers have been seen foraging on a wide range of winter-flowering plants, and they have almost all been identified as the Buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus Terrestris*), with the queens produced during the summer establishing nests in the autumn instead of going into hibernation. Many of the sightings are in towns and cities as they tend to be warmer than the surrounding countryside.

Other January plants for pollinators

Along with mahonia, winter-flowering honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*) and winter-flowering heather (*Erica carnea*) will help give those winter-active bees the best chance. The evergreen sweet box or Christmas box (*Sarcococca confusa*) may actually flower slightly later than Christmas, but its heavenly scent is worth waiting for! We hope you had a merry Christmas and wish you all the best for 2024!