

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Hungry bees!

One of my New Year's resolutions is to provide more winter and early spring flowering plants for pollinators. I did a quick tally in my garden at the time of writing this in January and found only four plants flowering: camellia 'Yuletide' (*Camellia x vernalis*), winter iris (*Iris unguicularis*), sweet box (*Sarcococca confusa*) and, borrowed from my neighbour's garden, a winter-flowering cherry (*Prunus x subhirtella*). It was the first cold snap of the winter and who knows what February will bring, but bumblebees are hardier than you think, and it's very likely you will see queens in February on the lookout for nectar and pollen for themselves and their first batch of offspring. Luckily my snowdrops should be through by then – I have plenty of these but they are slower to flower than elsewhere, no doubt because of my heavy, cold clay soil. But they will come through, are easy to grow, and spread naturally.

What else could I have at this critical time of year for pollinators? Winter-flowering honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*) would be a good choice, a valuable source of nectar for winter-active bumblebees. A winter-flowering jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*), with its yellow star flowers would also be a good bet – there was one here when we moved in over 30 years ago, so time for another I think! *Viburnum tinus* is another good shrub which flowers reliably at this time of year – it is large, evergreen, with clusters of small, creamy-white flowers produced over a long period from late winter into early spring. Early spring flowering bulbs such as crocus and daffodils are also important sources of nectar and pollen.

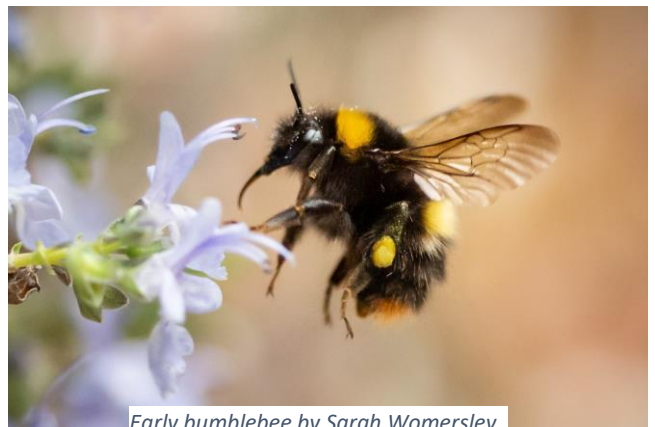
Pollinator plant of the month – crocus

Crocus are very early-flowering – the lovely pale lilac *Crocus tommasinianus* will spread naturally, its flowers opening in the sun. I like the idea of wildlife gardening expert Kate Bradbury who plants crocus in her greenhouse to help bumblebees – the crocus are protected from downpours and the bumblebees have somewhere warm and dry to collect pollen and nectar. The door of the greenhouse has to be left ajar, of course, so the bumbles can get in and out, but it's an idea worth trying.

Wild bee of the month – Early bumblebee

Each month this year I shall be featuring one of our wild bee species – there are around 270 of these and just one species of managed honey bee! My main source of reference is *The Wild Bee Handbook* by Sarah Wyndham-Lewis (2023), which is a wonderfully informative book.

The early bumblebee (*Bombus pratorum*), as its name suggests, is one of the first to emerge in spring. It is one of the so-called 'Big 8', the most common bumblebees found in the UK. It is a smallish bumblebee, quite round and fluffy, with one yellow band at the front of the thorax, one at the front of the abdomen and a small pale orange tail. They are quite widespread, probably because they are very adaptable and resourceful, nesting in a variety of places above and below ground, from old rodent nests to bird boxes. They are a short-tongued species and, as such, can be seen nectar-robbing plants, whereby they bite holes at the base of tubular flowers such as comfrey and honeysuckle, to reach the nectaries! As it emerges so early, this bee in particular depends on plenty of early forage, especially plants that provide the vital pollen with which they feed their first brood, such as willow catkins.



Early bumblebee by Sarah Womersley

