

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Hedging your bets

Native hedgerows are brilliant habitats for wildlife. They provide food and shelter for insects, birds, amphibians and small mammals. Sadly, half the hedgerows present in Britain in the late 1940s have been removed, making way for vast fields of monocultures and the huge machine which crop them. Those that are left are flayed to within an inch of their life. I used to like the look of neatly cut hedgerows lining the lanes – now I know that hedges that are cut cannot flower in the following spring, and for maximum value to wildlife, they must be allowed to flower. Flowers provide food for insects, which are pollinators, and pollinated flowers yield fruits and seeds to support a wide range of wildlife, especially in the winter. Received wisdom is now to cut hedgerows every third year, and never to cut hedgerows on both sides of a lane in the same year. This means that each hedgerow will flower two years out of three. You may see this being put into practice, with one side of a hedgerow looking untidy and the other side carefully trimmed!

If you need to plant or replace a hedge, consider a wildlife hedge using a mix of native plants – remember variety is the key to biodiversity. Bare-root native hedge plants are quite cheap and can be planted from late autumn to late winter (wait if the ground is waterlogged or frozen). Native hedging can include the following plants: Hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*), which forms a good thick barrier and has lovely white flowers (may) and red berries (haws) in the autumn; Blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), a vigorous thorny contender, not for the faint-hearted (!) but with lovely delicate white flowers in early spring, followed by purple sloes in autumn for you to make gin with; Dog-rose (*Rosa canina*), another vigorous, thorny one, but well worth it for the exquisite, open pink or white flowers and hips in the autumn; Guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), with white, flat clusters of flowers, and red, translucent berries. If you want to throw in a small tree, the field maple (*Acer campestre*), has yellow-green flowers in spring which are loved by wild bees and good yellow autumn leaf colour. Goat willow, or pussy willow (*Salix caprea*) is a top attraction in February, its furry catkins not only contain nectar, but masses of pollen which you will see as the male catkins turn from silvery-grey to bright yellow. A magnet for huge queen bumblebees and some early solitary bees. Remember to vary the cutting regime and preserve the flowers!



Goat willow (a.k.a. pussy willow) in flower, note the pollen all over my fingers!

Pollinator plant of the month

I decided to make Common gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) my pollinator plant of the month, because even though its peak flowering time is April and May, it actually flowers from January until June, and it has been wonderful to see its bright yellow flowers on Frensham Common at a rather dreary time of the year. With the sun on them, the flowers have a gorgeous smell of coconut, and they are a good source of nectar for bees and butterflies. Folklore states that when gorse is out of flower, kissing is out of fashion, but since other species take over when common gorse finishes, it can usually be found flowering year round – phew!

Other February plants for pollinators



Crocus tommasinianus, a bumblebee favourite.

Snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*) and crocus species will spread naturally and are great for early pollinators. Yellow winter aconites (*Eranthis hyemalis*) are good too, and you may also see the delicate yellow flowers of lesser celandines appearing at woodland edges, one of the earliest wildflowers attracting the first hoverflies, and later bumblebees, flies and beetles.