

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Time to look forward

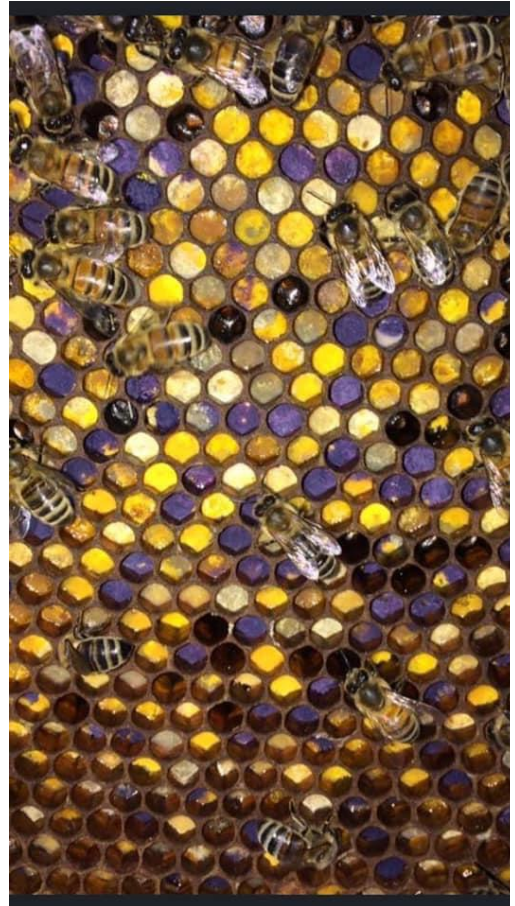
The short, dark days of winter are behind us, and the clocks will be springing forward at the end of the month, bringing lighter evenings. March is not my favourite month – that accolade goes to May – but it is the most *hopeful*. Signs of new life are everywhere. Some spring bulbs are already flowering, others are pushing their way up and the new green growth of perennials is starting to show. If your garden is a complete mess, like mine, you can congratulate yourself on providing a home for a multitude of wildlife from beetles to toads. But even I know I have to make inroads into it now, in order for the next season's growth to flourish. I will cut down all the dead vegetation, prune the shrubs which flower on this year's growth, like buddleia, ceratostigma and lavender (don't cut into old wood!) and start sowing pollinator-friendly annuals, such as cornflower, cosmos and calendula.

Have you seen any pollinators flying yet? As soon as the temperature rises, they will be on the wing, looking for early nectar and pollen. You may well have already seen the large queens of the buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) as they are quite easy to identify. The early bumblebee (*Bombus pratorum*) is, as its name suggests, one of the earliest to emerge from hibernation and is quite small by comparison, with a pretty red tail and bright yellow stripes. Like many ground-nesting bumblebees, they tend to favour old rodent holes as nest sites.

Pollen is used by bees to feed their growing larvae, because of its high protein content. Our honey bees have been venturing out, and returning with their pollen baskets full, always a good sign! The pollen varies in colour depending on what they've been foraging on, for example daffodil pollen is yellow, whereas blackthorn pollen is a ruddy red-brown. Later in the year, poppies produce black pollen, and horse chestnut is magenta. When honey bees store pollen in their combs, the frames can look like stained glass windows – absolutely beautiful!

Pollinator plant of the month

A plant I am never without is the perennial wallflower 'Bowlé's Mauve' (*Erysimum linfolium*). This flowers virtually all year, providing a reliable source of nectar for the bees for many months. The plants quickly become quite shrubby, and in my garden tend to grow in a prostrate manner over the walls, before becoming woody and untidy – but no matter, because cuttings take easily from the old plants, so I always have replacements!



Other March plants for pollinators

Our native primrose (*Primula vulgaris*) is loved by long-tongued insects such as butterflies and bee flies, which can reach the nectar at the base of the flower tube. They self-seed, or you can dig up clumps and divide them, so you always have a supply. Spring-flowering hellebores provide plenty of pollen and nectar, provided they are single-flowered varieties for easy access, and the native stinking hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*) flowers in the coldest weather and is loved by bees.