

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Bluebells and bilberries

The Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) and hybrids are flowering as I write this, but our lovely native bluebell (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) is somewhat slower to appear in the woodlands which are their favoured habitat. But I recently saw a stunning blue circle of them around a magnolia in bloom, in the grounds of the Alice Holt Research Station, brought on, no doubt, by the warm weather in early April. The deep blue of the native bluebell is incomparable, quite unlike the paler blue of the Spanish impostors. There are also other differences. The native bluebell has narrower leaves and flowers on one side of its drooping stem, with a lovely sweet scent. The Spanish bluebell, by contrast, has broader leaves, flowers all around the stem, has an upright habit and no smell at all.

Incidentally, I found out from the Wildlife Trust's website that the bluebell's Latin name, *Hyacinthoides*, comes from a Greek myth. Apparently when the Prince Hyacinthus died, the tears of the god Apollo spelled the word 'alas' on the petals of the hyacinth flower that sprang up from his blood. *Non-scripta* means unlettered and distinguishes the bluebell from the similar-looking hyacinth. I'd always wondered what that bit of the name meant, and now I know!

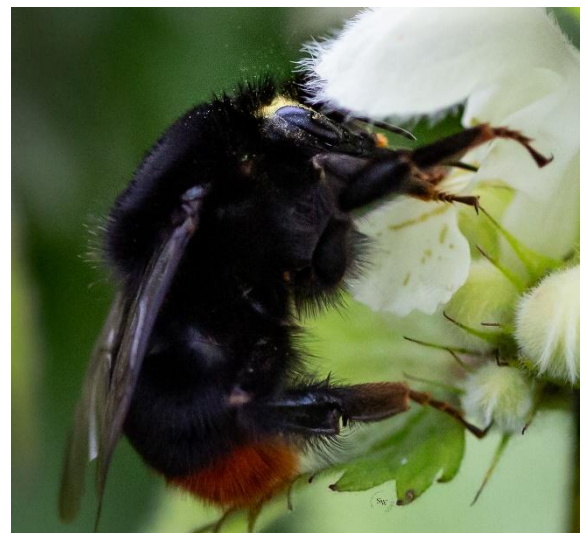
Bilberries (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) also flower around the same time, and like the bluebells, they are early this year. They are plentiful in Bourne Wood, also straying into next-door Farnham Heath, and unlike the bluebells, are somewhat inconspicuous. Look closer though, and you will see tiny lantern-shaped pinky-red flowers. You will also see bumblebees pollinating the flowers to produce the crop of tiny blue-black berries which can be made into jams, pies and liqueurs – if you have the patience to pick enough!

Pollinator plant of the month – Red dead-nettle

Red dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*) is one of those plants (weeds?) you see everywhere but perhaps don't appreciate its value to pollinators. Its pinky-red hooded flowers appear from March to October, and like yellow archangel and other members of the dead nettle family, it doesn't have stinging leaves. Its flowers are visited by lots of different species of long-tongued insects, including the red mason bee and bumblebee species. The caterpillars of garden tiger, white ermine and angle shades moths feed on the leaves. I am leaving it in my garden, as it doesn't seem invasive, along with the yellow archangel (which definitely is!).

Wild bee of the month – Red tailed bumblebee

I am featuring the red-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus lapidarius*) this month as it seems to have made a comeback since its numbers dropped dramatically in 2024. We spotted a beauty on our first Bee Safari on the Farnham Bee Trail last month. With its big red tail and black body, it is very easy to spot! The queen emerges in early spring and looks for a place to nest and lay her eggs. The first workers appear about six weeks after the nest is established, and the species can be seen up till the end of September. They have a medium-length tongue, and feed on a range of flowers such as dandelions, knapweed and lavender.



No Mow May

Are you going to embrace Plantlife's annual campaign and put the lawnmower away this May? It's one of the easiest ways to help the environment, letting wildflowers like daisies, dandelions and clovers grow to support bees and butterflies. You'll be amazed at what comes up! For maximum wildlife benefit, you could carry on until the end of August, at least for a part of your patch.