

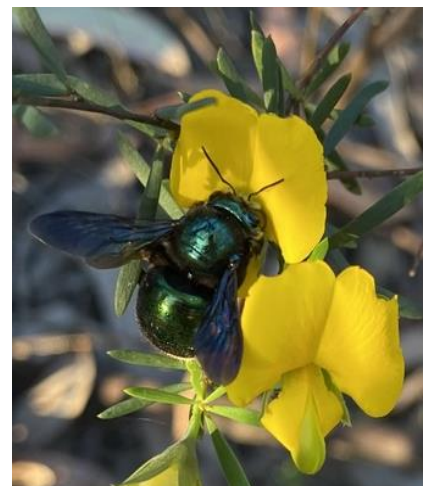
Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

A little Aussie sunshine!

The last time I put pen to paper for this magazine, I was just about to head for sunnier climes to visit my sister in Australia. As I was also looking for bees (!), I thought a little digression from my usual ramblings might bring some much-needed sunshine into your lives!

Lovely though it was to see sunshine and blue skies every day, after our wet spring and wetter summer, I was initially disappointed not to see more bees, given that there are over 2000 native bees in Australia! There were, of course, honey bees (the European variety (*Apis mellifera*) doing a great job of pollinating crops in this vast country), but no bumblebees on the mainland (the European bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) only being found in Tasmania). I didn't see any other bees in and around where my sister lives on the Northern Beaches of Sydney (ok, it's a big country!). Things got better when I went to lunch at a friend's house, and after listening to me drone on about the many varieties of wild pollinators which visited my garden back home, she said the magic words: "Would you like to see our bees?" But these bees were unlike any bees I'd ever seen – more like a swarm of angry flying ants! They were harmless though, being native stingless bees (*Tetragonula*), tiny social bees which live in colonies like honey bees and produce small quantities of a tangy honey called 'sugarbag'. They were living in a small hive given to our friend, and we found another free-living colony in a nearby tree stump. Once I got my eye in, I saw many more stingless bees on my travels.

I had to wait until we visited my sister's small farm further north, some five hours drive from Sydney, before I found my next bee, the beautiful peacock carpenter bee (*Xylocopa bombylans*), one of the largest and most spectacular of Australia's native bees. We heard it first, a deep droning noise like a bluebottle, and then we saw it on a yellow flower, a jewel of an insect. The flower looked a bit like *Hypericum* but was in fact *Hibbertia scandens*, a sprawling climber.



Peacock carpenter bee © Tony Bush (CC BY-NC)



Blue-banded bee © Dianne Clarke (CC BY-NC)

I was keen to find the common blue-banded bee

(*Amegilla cingulata*), a lovely bee with its vivid iridescent blue stripes, apparently a regular visitor to gardens in Sydney, but I saw my first one in the Northern Tablelands, close to the Queensland border. They are easy to spot but are never still!

The blue-banded bee was voted Australian bee of the year whilst I was there, during Australian Pollinator Week, which raises awareness of the importance of pollinators for food production. The main focus is on honey bees, but they also highlight the importance of native bees as pollinators, with less reliance on imported bees.

Pollinator plant of the month – snowdrop

Back in our colder climes, the snowdrop (*Galanthus nivalis*) is one of the first flowers to bravely show its head in the chilly month of February. We inherited the snowdrops in our garden and they have spread everywhere over the years, sometimes naturally, but we also divided them to plant out in other parts of the garden and gave them away 'in the green' by the bagful! Galanthophiles (snowdrop collectors) pay big money to secure special varieties, but I am happy with our plucky common ones which never fail to delight in the depths of winter. They are a useful source of nectar and pollen for early flying pollinators.

Other February plants for pollinators

Crocus, too, are very early-flowering so good for early pollinators - the lovely pale lilac species *crocus tommasinianus* is the best to plant and will spread naturally.

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.