

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Waxing lyrical

Candles have a big part to play in the festive season, from Advent candles which we light to mark the passing of the days up till Christmas (far nicer than those ghastly chocolate calendars!) to centrepieces of the Christmas table. Beeswax candles are especially prized, but have you ever thought how the bees make it and what they use it for?

Worker honey bees secrete the wax from glands on their abdomen. They use it to build the comb we are all familiar with. Many beekeepers give the bees wax foundation (thin sheets of wax within a wooden frame) which they build up to create the cells in which they lay their eggs and store pollen and honey. But the bees don't need our help – they can make their own comb, and wild comb is a thing of beauty. I have seen fresh pure white comb made by a small colony which had built a nest inside an old box near our apiary.

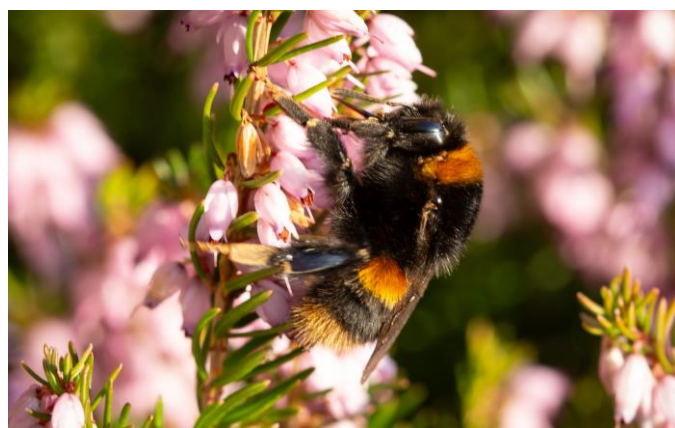
When beekeepers harvest honey, they remove the wax with which the bees cap the honey cells which is then cleaned and processed to produce wax bars and tablets. This can then be used to make candles, as well as other products such as soap, beeswax wraps and beeswax polish.

Pollinator plant of the month – Mahonia

The sulphur- yellow flower spikes of mahonia (*Mahonia japonica*) stand out like a beacon at this time of year. The scented flowers appear from November to March when little else is flowering, so it is a lifeline for winter-active bumblebees such as the Buff-tailed bumblebee. It is as tough as old boots and needs little attention, but it does need space as it can grow to about 5m tall and 4m wide (smaller selections are available), and prefers a sheltered rather than an exposed site. If you've got one, cherish it, if not, plant one!

Bee of the month –Buff-tailed bumblebee

You are very likely to see the Buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) on mahonia, even this late in the year, given the very mild weather we've been having. Climate change means more queens produced during the summer establish nests in the autumn instead of going into hibernation. Workers from these nests need nectar for themselves and pollen for their brood. If you see a bumble with pollen baskets full, she will be part of an active nest.



Buff-tailed bumblebee on winter-flowering heather by Sarah Womersley

Other December plants for pollinators

Other useful plants for bees venturing out on mild winter days include winter-flowering honeysuckle (*Lonicera fragrantissima*), winter flowering heather (*Erica carnea*) and the lovely sweet box (*Sarcococca confusa*) which you will smell before you see it!

With all good wishes from Hive Helpers for the Festive season! We are closed in January, so Pollinator Patch will be back in February.