

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers

Pollinator safari!

In a departure from my usual ramblings, I am going to write about a visit to a glorious wildlife garden, planted to attract a variety of pollinators. Alex is lucky enough to have a large garden in which she has provided plenty of habitats for wildlife. There are tawny and barn owl boxes, bee 'hotels' and insect habitats such as a dead hedge and numerous log piles, and a large enclosed pond at the foot of the garden, surrounded by mature trees and a wonderful hedgerow with lots of forage for pollinators.

Alex's interest in wildlife blossomed when her children had grown up and she was given a camera. She took a photography course and focused on wildlife, particularly birds, then acquired a macro lens which changed everything, revealing the fascinating world of insects, especially bees and butterflies. She began to plant especially for these pollinators, using specific plants for individual species, and different plants for each stage of their life cycle.

Planting for pollinators

The star of the show when I visited was the wildflower meadow, perfect for pollinating insects. Alex tells me the plants vary from year to year, including ox-eye daisy, vetch, salad burnet and buttercups, to name just a few. As well as many bees, I saw the beautiful six-spot burnet moth, a day-flying moth with six red spots on each forewing - it loves knapweed and thistle in grassy places. I also saw a small copper butterfly, which was *very* small if you've never seen one!

Many so-called weeds are allowed to flourish, such as garlic mustard which is the food plant of the orange tip caterpillar. There is yarrow for the green hairstreak butterfly. And Alex was thrilled to find eggs of the more elusive brown hairstreak butterfly – these are high fliers amongst oak and ash, so not often recorded in the butterfly state, and the eggs were proof that they were around locally. They lay their eggs exclusively on blackthorn which, naturally, Alex accepts in her garden!



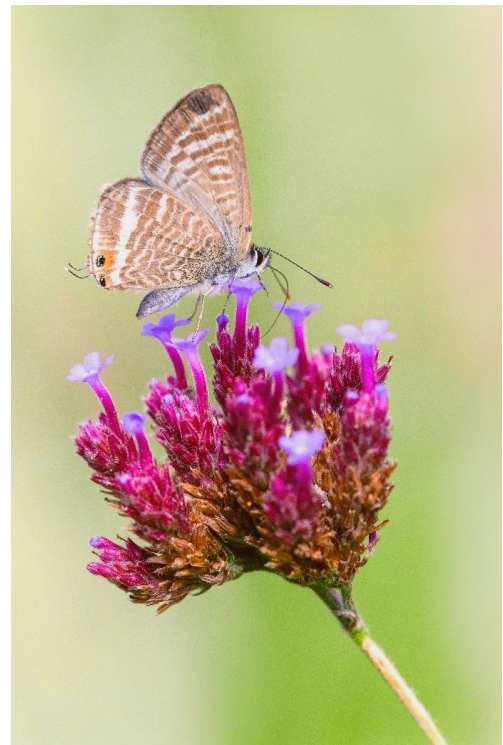
Brown hairstreak butterfly

As you walk up the garden towards the house, Alex points out the plants for specific pollinators: the native lesser periwinkle (*Vinca minor*), which is less invasive than its *major* cousin and attracts the delightful hairy-footed flower bee; the native yellow loosestrife (*Lysimachia vulgaris*) for the bee of the same name – this is a solitary bee which collects floral oils as well as pollen to waterproof its nest cells; and the everlasting sweet pea (*Lathyrus latifolius*) to attract the solitary leafcutter bee and the long-tailed blue butterfly, an exotic migrant from the Mediterranean which was recorded in the garden late summer 2020.

There is an old-fashioned crimson weigela which is also popular with the bees, a large deciduous shrub which is not at all fussy, and will grow in sun and light shade - in fact Alex issued a health warning as hers is quite vigorous!



Leafcutter bee



Long-tailed blue butterfly

Alex is as passionate as the bees about salvias and slips one in wherever she can. Her favourite is shocking pink *Salvia microphylla* 'Cerro Potosi', a long-flowering evergreen form which is favoured by the stunning hummingbird hawkmoth. She also likes *Salvia greggii* 'Icing Sugar' with its bi-coloured pink/lilac flowers. I have always steered away from salvias because of my heavy soil, but Alex also gardens on clay and finds that adding compost and grit to a large planting hole works for her.

Alex's garden is a haven for her, as well as for the myriad wildlife which abounds. She finds that simply coming out into her garden immediately eases any worries, as she focuses her mind (and her camera!) on another world so very different from our own. Simply sitting quietly and watching the bees and butterflies as they come and go on a patch of flowers is a wonderful way of letting the mind rest.

Many of us do not have large gardens, but I took home plenty of ideas that I could apply to my smaller patch. I am going to try specific plants to encourage different kinds of pollinators, and look more closely at the ones I've got - and I shall plant more salvias! It was inspirational – we can all have a go at planting for pollinators. Thank you Alex!



Hummingbird hawkmoth on Salvia Cerro Potosi

Image credits: Alex Potts. To see more of Alex's work, please visit www.kilnphoto.co.uk