

We can all Bee Healthy by Roselle Chapman

One of the joys of this past summer was watching the Bee Healthy Borders grow, flower and buzz with pollinators in their first year. You might remember that the Bee Healthy project was developed as a partnership between Wild Oxfordshire, the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and the Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, inspired by Craig Blackwell's magnificent bee friendly planting scheme at the Chipping Norton Health Centre. In autumn 2019, volunteers planted Bee Healthy Borders at Summertown Health Centre and St. Bartholomew's Medical Centre in Oxford and Windrush Medical Practice in Witney. Each border was created using 15 nectar and pollen rich herbaceous perennial plant species for the benefit of bumblebees and other pollinators as well as patients, staff and visitors. The project was supported by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, Smiths of Bletchingdon and Postcode Local Trust, a grant giving charity funded entirely by players of People's Postcode Lottery.

Whilst we were locked down in the warm, dry spring and summer of 2020, I was worried that the young plants would perish, but I should not have been. After all we had not only selected the plants to be good for bees and other pollinators but to be drought resistant too. So, when we finally emerged from lockdown, I was delighted to find that almost all of the plants had not only survived but were thriving. Most importantly a wide range of pollinators were there; the seven most common species of bumblebees were observed across the sites as well several solitary bees, including the hairy-footed flower bee (*Anthophora plumipes*), the ashy mining bee (*Andrena cineraria*), the tawny mining bee (*Andrena fulva*) and mourning bee (*Melecta albifrons*). I was particularly excited to see the fascinating wool carder bee (*Anthidium manicatum*) aggressively patrolling their territories. Butterflies, hoverflies, flies ladybirds and ground beetles were also observed. Interestingly one of the sites has a lawn, the mowing of which had not been prioritised, and their dandelion population was booming. It was an incredible sight, not least because of the quantity of tiny parasitic wasps on the flowers, which is good news for the gardeners of north Oxford as these, along with lady birds and hoverfly larvae, are voracious predators of aphids. The Sage and Michaelmas daisies were still providing a colourful display of flowers right through October and pollen and nectar for late flying males and new queens stocking up before going into hibernation. I look forward to visiting the borders at the end of February when those queens will emerge from hibernation and kick start their life cycle by foraging for nectar and pollen on the Lungwort and Hellebores.

The Bee Healthy gardens have also been important for the wellbeing of humans. Specifically, these spaces have been very popular among NHS staff working during the Coronavirus pandemic: *"The bee garden is a source of great enjoyment every morning when we come into the surgery. Lots of people have commented on the flowers appearing. Especially in these strange times, it provides a nice distraction and a reminder of the natural world, oblivious to it all."* -GP, Summertown Health Centre

The Bee Healthy Project Guide documents our experiences and provides practical information to help individuals and organisations create similar projects, not only at health centres but libraries, community centres, schools, places of worship, communal parks and of course private gardens. The area of the estimated 24 million UK gardens is larger than that of all of our National Nature Reserves

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combined, so collectively the way we manage our gardens has a huge impact on biodiversity for better or worse. If managed for pollinators and other wildlife in mind gardeners can make a positive difference. The focus for Bee Healthy Project was to plant nectar and pollen rich plants grown in peat-free compost with a minimal chemical input, but there is so much more that can be done for bees, pollinators and other wildlife. With a few small changes to the way we manage our public and private gardens we can bring major benefits for the creatures that call them home:

1. **Fill gardens with a wide variety of nectar and pollen rich plants** to provide forage throughout the year. The RHS have produced an excellent [list](#) that includes herbaceous perennials, shrubs and small trees suitable for gardens of all sizes.
2. **Avoid using pesticides** - use them only when really necessary. Resist their jaunty packaging conveniently placed near the queue for the checkout and don't forget they only illustrate what you want to kill, not what the sprays actually kills. They are powerful, effective insecticides that kill insects but fewer than 1% of Britain's insects are actually garden pests. Tolerate some damage and use cultivation techniques such as rotation of fruit and vegetables or hand removal. Using biological controls and encouraging natural enemies can reduce or eliminate the need for spraying. If a chemical control must be used, then proceed with caution, follow the instructions to the letter to ensure that people, pets and the wider environment are kept safe and never spray open flowers. The RHS have produced an excellent [information sheet](#) on pesticides for home gardeners. People concerned by the decline in pollinator numbers can purchase plants grown without synthetic pesticides from [organic nurseries](#). In Oxfordshire we are blessed with a wealth of small independent garden nurseries whose staff are hugely knowledgeable on the subject of wild life gardening and the provenance of their plants – try [Rosy Bee](#), [Applegarth Nurseries](#) and [Babylon Plants](#). The other way to ensure that your new plants are pesticide free is to grow them yourself, either from seed or propagate new plants from cuttings in peat free compost. Many of the plants that we used in the 'Bee Healthy Borders' such as Lamb's ears and catmint grow readily from divisions. Every 3 or 4 years divide the plant in early spring, just as the new growth appears.
3. **Delay the Autumn garden slash and burn 'tidy' until Spring** - Providing a food source for bees is only half the equation. Many of our bees and other wildlife need a place to spend the winter, protected from cold and predators. They may hunker down under a piece of peeling tree bark, or they may stay tucked away in the hollow stem of a fennel plant or an ornamental grass. Some spend the winter as an egg or larvae in a burrow in the ground or as a chrysalis hanging from dead plant stems or tucked into the soil or leaf litter. Queen bumblebees can spend half of their life in hibernation, they need to be able to do this, undisturbed, in your garden. Ladybirds also spend the colder months tucked under a pile of leaves, nestled at the base of a plant, or hidden under a rock. When we remove every last overwintering site by cutting everything down and completely cleaning up the garden, we are doing ourselves no favour. Leaving the garden intact for the winter means you'll get a jump start on controlling pests in the spring.
4. **Allow lawns work harder for nature** - The effects of having a less-manicured lawn, if we are willing to accept them, can be positive. Longer grass not treated with weedkillers or fertilisers increases biodiversity by allowing more plant species to move in, creating a habitat for small creatures and producing flowers to support pollinating insects. Long grass can also make an appropriate place to grow and naturalise bulbs such as Crocus or Narcissus which may not be suited to beds and borders, while you can also experiment with other later-flowering perennials plants such as Camassia in long grass. Pushing a mower can be exhausting, too,

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especially on a slope – mowing less frequently means more time for tasks you enjoy. The RSPB have produced a [helpful guide](#) for reducing mower dependency.

5. **Create a pond** - During the past century, nearly 70% of ponds have been lost from the UK countryside, so as well as providing much-needed habitat for frogs, toads, newts and dragonflies garden ponds also provide a water source for birds and mammals. All you need to know about [creating a pond](#) in your garden has been produced by Freshwater Habitats Trust.

If getting your fingers dirty or influencing how green space is managed is not for you, then simply enjoy observing different bees in gardens, parks and streets where we are taking our daily exercise. For help with ID, try the fantastic [Field Studies Council ID chart](#), or focus on bumblebees with [The Bumblebee Book by Nick Owens](#). If you are feeling confident then Steven Falk's fully comprehensive, [Field Guide the the Bees of Britain](#) will enthral you.

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