Bumble bees

After a long, hard winter, we all enjoy the earliest spring blossom in our gardens, but bumblebees badly need it! When temperatures start rising, the queens emerge from hibernation and set about foraging for nectar and finding a nest. This is getting hard for them as farming has become more mechanised, with hedgerows grubbed up and fields ploughed right to the edge. Bumblebees have lost a rich source of pollen and nectar from wild flowers so now rely on our gardens to plug the gap.

No one underestimates the massive commercial importance of bumblebees in pollinating crops and Charles Darwin highlighted their unique role in fertilising some plants. He observed in 'The Origin of Species': "I have no doubt that if the whole genus of humble-bees became extinct or very rare in England, the heartsease and red clover would become very rare, or wholly disappear." So, in making our gardens more colourful and interesting, we would also win Darwin's approval.

Since bumblebees, or bummers in Scots, start working earlier in the year than honeybees. With their furry coats, bummers can tolerate much colder weather, so, in Scotland, play a vital part in pollinating early blossom. If we provide a good succession of suitable flowers from early spring through till the autumn, we'll also have fun watching the busy workers disappearing inside a foxglove or seeming to roll around on a flat, open, species rose flower.

Bees will feed on most of our flowers, but not on bedding plants, or double -flowered specimens which have little scent and no nectar. The extra whorls of petals have been bred to replace the male and female parts of the flower and the vital nectaries are very small or nonexistent.

If you do decide to plant with bees in mind, it's worth remembering how they harvest the nectar. Some species, like Bombus hortorum, have long tongues so make a point of using tubular flowers, like Lonicera, Pulmonaria or Nepeta, while others, such as Bombus pratorum, have short tongues and enjoy open topped species like Verbenas, Sedums or hardy Geraniums.

A bumblebee-friendly garden should offer nectar and pollen from March onwards. Flowering currants, rhododendrons, bugle and the amazing blaze of geans [wild cherries] that grow wild on a steep bank by my burn give the emerging queens a great start I always enjoy seeing queens feasting on my snowdrops, Lonicera fragrantissima and even my peach tree. Our gardens are always crammed with flowers in summer but the challenge is to keep this going into late summer and autumn. This is when next year's young queens need a good feed before hibernating. Monk's-hood, snowberry, knapweed and Sedum spectabile varieties will certainly do the trick. I know a borage flower will brighten up a cool summer drink, but leave some for the bees!

Wild flowers are certainly popular with bees, but most cultivated garden flowers do just as well, as will blossom from all the other parts of the garden. The fruitcage with its rasps and loganberries, the herb garden's thyme, sage and marjoram and even the humble broad bean provide a special treat. And don't forget buddleia appeals just as much to bees as to butterflies.

Having a nest or two in the garden means bees are more likely to stay around and you'll get endless entertainment watching them from the comfort of a deckchair. Needless to say, I enjoy the luxury of heaven knows how many nests on my smallholding. Dry stane dykes with all their cavities, old vole holes on dryish banks and beneath hedges will appeal. I find a cavity below the potting shed usually furnishes residents with suitable accommodation.

Bees need a dry site, away from direct sunlight and a hole previously occupied by mice or voles makes an ideal home. If, on a sunny spring day, you have a look round the garden and identify likely places, take a seat, arm yourself with a cup of coffee and keep an eye out for queens. With luck you'll see one reconnoitring the ground and selecting a site.

Garden centres and mail order catalogues are bristling with enticing artificial bee nests, but there's very little evidence that bees show the slightest interest in these expensive establishments. Plant ecologist, Ken Thompson, played a key role in Sheffield University's BUGS Project [1999-2002]. This looked at how important urban gardens were for biodiversity, and the researchers did touch on the question of these artificial nests. 30 were built according to a 'model' design and were strategically placed in gardens for each of the three years of the project. Thompson commented: "I would be proud to nest in such a snug and desirable residence." Sadly, the bees didn't share his enthusiasm and not a single one boasted an occupant. So I would certainly recommend spending any spare dosh on a new plant or two, rather than one of these nests.

If you'd like to do more to help conserve bees, why not get in touch with the Bumble Bee Conservation Trust. http://www.bumblebeeconservationtrust.co.uk/surveys.htm will give you more information.