

Pollinators under threat

Many of our food crops such as apples, pears, strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes and field beans, as well as many wild flowers need visits by insects to transfer the pollen between plants, leading to fertilisation and the production of seeds and fruits. The dependence on pollinators varies from crop to crop; from an allotment perspective, runner beans have an 85% dependence on pollinators, cucumbers 65% and top fruit – apples, pears and plums have between 65% and 85% dependence.

Sadly, along with other pollinators of crops and wild plants such as bumblebees, moths, butterflies, hoverflies and lacewings, honey bees are threatened by the spread of pests and diseases, land-use intensification (including habitat destruction and pesticide use) and climate change. It is feared that two thirds of pollinators are in marked decline and that 25% are threatened with extinction.



Ladybird

What you can do

By following the five steps below, we as allotment holders can play our part in current efforts to halt this decline and maintain a healthy eco-system.

- Grow more early and late flowering, nectar- and pollen-rich flowers amongst your allotment produce
- Large allotment sites could leave small, hard to cultivate patches of land to grow wild to provide breeding areas for beneficial insects
- Cut grass on plots and in communal areas less often or leave some of the grass long
- Avoid disturbing or destroying nesting or hibernating insects - postpone your plot tidy up till spring
- Think carefully about whether to use pesticides as these also kill beneficial insects



Hoverfly

Other steps that plot-holders can take on their plots include creating nesting boxes for solitary bees, lacewings or ladybirds and providing somewhere for them to drink; a shallow bowl filled with pebbles is ideal. Building an insect house with your children is a great way of getting them involved and interested in the natural world. Think about developing forage useful to bees and other pollinators to increase the biodiversity and environmental value of the site as a whole.

Some allotment favourites that will feed pollinating insects

Spring – wallflower, spotted dead nettle, native primroses, black/red/whitecurrants

Summer – hollyhocks, chives, borage, marigolds, open centred dahlias,

Autumn – Showy sunflower, nasturtium, single flowered dahlias

Winter – if you have space on your plot or site most of the winter flowering shrubs will attract pollinators along with bulbs such as winter aconites and crocus under soft fruit bushes

National pollinator strategies

In November 2014 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs produced a "National pollinator strategy: for bees and other pollinators in England", which sets out a 10 year plan to help pollinating insects survive and thrive. The document can be downloaded from www.gov.uk/government/publications/

The government in Wales has also developed an Action Plan for Pollinators that can be downloaded from this website www.biodiversitywales.org.uk/en-GB/Wales-Action-Plan-for-Pollinators

Allotment honey-bee-keeping

NAS supports the keeping of bees on allotment sites, however allotment tenants do need to check their Tenancy Agreements and speak to their Landlord prior to siting hives on an allotment plot.

The 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act, Section 61 does on the face of it provide an interpretation of cultivation which includes horticulture, the keeping of bees and the growth of fruit and vegetables. Further information is available below in the practical actions and considerations.

Following the arrival of the Varroa mite in the 1990s numbers of UK honey bee colony fell significantly but awareness campaigns over the last few years have resulted in a resurgence in the popularity of beekeeping and there are some very successful projects on allotment sites; contact the NAS office for details.

It has been estimated that honeybees pollinate about 34% of crops in the UK and having beehives near or on your site will result in higher yields and better quality produce. Here are some tips for prospective beekeepers and landowners who are considering beehives on their site.

- The NAS recommends that associations and landlords who allow allotment beekeeping have a Beekeeping Policy and agreement in place; the Society can offer assistance with this. Some sites will be unsuitable for the keeping of honeybees.
- If you are embarking on an allotment beekeeping project or wish to keep hives on your plot make sure that you spend time consulting everyone on your site and nearby households, be prepared to accommodate the needs of those with allergies or other concerns.



Honeybee



Bumble bees

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- Involve others – the more people on site are involved in the beekeeping project, the more sustainable it will be. The cultivation practices of your fellow plot-holders could affect your bees as they are very susceptible to insecticide sprays.
- Beekeeping is a responsibility in a public place, link with your local British Bee Keepers Association who will offer training and ongoing support; BBKA membership offers insurance for beekeeping activities. We would also encourage beekeepers to register their hives with the government National Bee Unit; which gives free access to advice and support.

Practical considerations

- Although beehives can be kept successfully on an individual's plot we would recommend setting up an apiary in an agreed place. Hives are best situated away from other plot holders, paths and public roads.
- Surround the apiary with two meter bee-proof fencing so bees fly up and away – over people's heads. Try to keep long implements away from the hive area as they can be used by vandals to tip over hives.
- Only handle bees when the area around the apiary is quiet but do not manipulate bees when you are the only person on site.