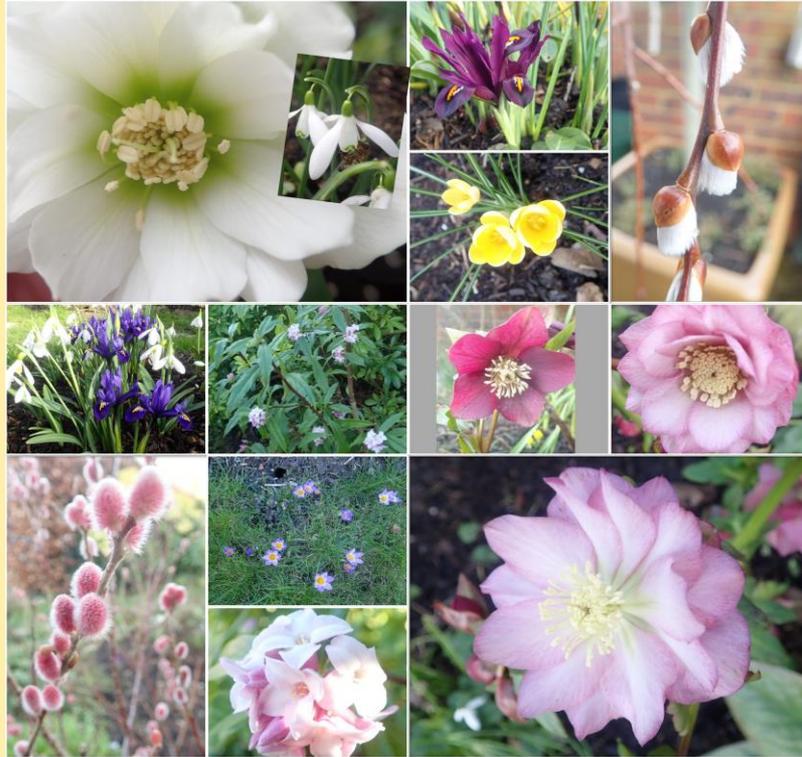


Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

February 2021

A Pollinating Buzz in my Rural Garden - A monthly look at how my rural garden is enjoyed by pollinating insects



our gardening choices can help support these pollinators and what we can do as individuals to help.

Pollinators face many threats some of these you as gardeners can help to mitigate.

1. Habitat loss and fragmentation. - I help by providing nesting material in my garden, places where they can snuggle down in winter and find the right material to lay their eggs so they can maintain their population along with providing a stepping stone through our rural community.
2. Intensified farming of non flowering crops and low diversity of flowers. - I try and provide a variety of flowering plants throughout the year to cater for the huge variety of insects needing to feed on pollen and nectar at different times of the year.
3. Pesticide use not only kills the bad guys but also the pollinators, some of which predate the very insects we used the pesticides for! - I haven't used pesticides in my garden for years, I much prefer to hear the buzz of pollinators, the singing of the birds and know that the hedgehogs can eat my slugs without getting sick. Seeds are often treated with harmful pesticides that are known to be toxic to pollinators. Pesticides also affect the health of your soil and all of the beneficial organisms that live in it.

So there is so much we can do to help and I read so often that Insects have the ability to bounce back so we can all do our bit to help pollinators in our own gardens. This is the reason I decided to write a blog. I wanted to share the things I've learnt and tried in my garden, what pollinators I observe and record what I'm seeing each month.



From a snow covered frozen pond to glorious sunshine all in the same month

What Was buzzing in February

February is always the month when I start to feel that spring is just around the corner. Bulbs are punching their way through the ground, buds are appearing on the trees and the days seem a little lighter and longer. This year though I was sharply reminded that it was still winter when the temperature dropped suddenly, and we woke up to stunning carpets of snow across the fields! As much as I delight at the sight of my garden covered in a pristine sparkling white carpet, after a day or two I start to wonder how the garden and wildlife is surviving underneath and hope that it disappears as quickly as it arrived. Luckily as it melted away the delicate flowers of my Snowdrops, Helebores and *Iris reticulata* were still in place and it appears that not too much damage was done to the more delicate shrubs in my garden.

I take comfort in knowing that the piles of logs, sticks and leaves stuffed under my hedges and in discreet piles around the garden will have also helped insects to survive the cold spell as nature intended. Tusks of long grass left over winter will be harbouring insects such as Buff tailed bumblebees that will soon be bringing much delight as they emerge in spring. Ivy, whether you let it ramble through hedges or up trees or even as a decorative plant through a shady area will not only help the late foraging bees and butterflies with a good source of nectar and pollen, it also provides fantastic dense evergreen cover for a whole horde of insects in various forms throughout the winter.

This may be the time of year when it is so tempting to start cutting back dead foliage but I must sit on my hands and hold out a little longer so that the many beneficial pollinating insects won't have their eggs, larvae, nymphs and pupae disturbed too early. Wait a while and they will thank you by being your first line of defence against those aphids and other pests in early spring and provide food for many hungry birds.



My Hoverfly Lagoon and Bee Hotel in my Chillenden garden

February is a good time to think about constructing bee and bug hotels for your garden having them ready once solitary bees start emerging in the spring. This is particularly successful for two types of Solitary bees, Mason bees and Leafcutter bees. These bees love to use bee hotels. You can buy them but they are so easy to make. I make sure they are positioned facing the sun where I can watch them. It is so fascinating to see these harmless little bees in and out of the tubes carrying materials with them. Once the female has laid an egg in the tubes she will provide it with a supply of pollen and nectar and seal them off individually before laying the next egg. The eggs will hatch into larvae, pupate and develop into an adult that will hibernate over winter to emerge next spring. In return you will be rewarded with a new population of bees to pollinate your garden. In particular Mason bees are known to be significant pollinators of fruit trees. Over the winter whilst out walking I'm always on the look out for dead hollow plant stems that make perfect tubes for solitary bees. These can then be positioned into a holding cavity to keep them dry and sealed off at the back. There is a lot of information online from various websites such as the Wildlife Trusts, BBCT and Bug life on how to construct a bee or bug hotel.

Whilst many Hoverfly species lay their eggs on aphid infested plants that will provide their pupating young with a supply of food some Hoverfly have an aquatic life stage with the larvae feeding on microbes in shallow water. Hoverflies are great pollinators, so to encourage as many species as possible in my garden this year I'm going to add a Hoverfly Lagoon. There are great instructions on how to build one yourself at the Buzz Club website.

<https://www.thebuzzclub.uk/hoverfly-lagoons>

It is also a good time to think about seed buying and planning. I have no greenhouse in my garden and find growing flowering plants and vegetables from seed a bit hit and miss. However the need to grow plants that are both pesticide free and cheap gets me having a go every year with some success. February is more about planning than sowing but I have sown a few tomato seeds indoors this month and also peas in a covered frame outdoors. Broad beans can also be sown directly into the soil this month and as my garden is small I dot a few in gaps at the back of sunny beds. It's good to plan ahead so that you have flowering plants throughout the year and the Bumblebee Conservation Trust have produced an excellent guide to gardening for Bumblebees throughout the season.

<https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/gardeningadvice/> At Kent Wildlife Trust there is the Gardening for a Wilder Kent Scheme offering help and advice and you can take part in online events such as Pollinator Friendly Gardening on 11th March and Wilder Lawns on the 20th March.

<https://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/events>



In my Chillenden garden this month. Hoverfly (*Meliscaeva auricollis*) The Honeybee (*Apis mellifera*), Bufftailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*) and a Buffish mining bee (*Andrea nigroaenea*).

As February draws to a close, this last week has been a stark contrast to the snow earlier in the month. The sunshine has the birds singing in the garden and there are few early pollinators buzzing around. I get so excited when I see them in my garden. Within a few short days I have seen many Queen Bufftailed bumblebees (*Bombus terrestris*) foraging in particular on the *Iris reticulata* and Mahonia. They really seem to get 'stuck in' to this giving me plenty of photo opportunities. A lovely Red Admiral butterfly stopped briefly on a stepping stone but quickly disappeared again. These are mainly migrants but are now believed to sometimes overwinter in the south so I was disappointed not to get a photo.

I also spotted my first Hoverfly of the year probably a *Meliscaeva auricollis*, (not many hoverflies have common names and it was identified on twitter for me). This is one of the first Hoverflies to appear when the sun shines in February. Ladybirds are everywhere there is plant debris, popping up in the sunshine and disappearing again when the sun goes down! And of course the Honeybees are out mainly on my Snowdrops that provide them with vital pollen early in the year.