

Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

March 2021

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

Pollinating insects include not only bees and butterflies but other insects too such as hoverflies, moths, wasps and beetles to name but a few. Kent Wildlife Trust has recently launched a campaign called 'Action For Insects' in their fight against insect decline. 41% of our insects are threatened with extinction. Follow this link to find out more.

<https://www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/action-insects>

It is well known that urban gardens can provide refuge for pollinators such as bees and hoverflies in an otherwise developed area. Gardens can offer a variety and abundance of flowering plants that can be a lifeline for our insects. It is also true I believe that rural gardens like my own can also provide important spaces for bees and other pollinators to forage and connect habitats that would otherwise be fragmented. With a little knowledge and forethought to the flowers and shrubs we plant and saying no to pesticides our rural gardens can be a happy place for our pollinators and add a little diversity to the otherwise typically monoculture environment around us.



Your garden is your outside space and we all utilise this space in different ways. How we like our garden to look is very personal and like art its beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Wildlife in general needs food, water, shelter and a place to breed. In your garden this can be provided essentially from four things, trees, deadwood, water and a variety of planting. Most of us have some of these in our garden. If you are providing flowers that are rich in pollen and nectar you will soon see them attract the buzz of pollinators. I love to watch insects in the garden and observing which flowers, both native and exotic they choose. With that in mind I thought I would keep a monthly watch as the seasons change, noting what is flowering in my garden and what is turning up to pollinate them. Whilst the focus will be on the popular insects we

love to see in the garden, we mustn't forget other insects such as moths, beetles and wasps and

maybe a few more that I will come across in the coming months that I hope to learn more about during my observations.

What Was buzzing in January

As our climate changes pollinators are seen in our gardens later and later in the winter months, but for most January is a time for them to rest and prepare for warmer months ahead in whichever way they choose. Be it hibernating, or as eggs, larvae, caterpillars or immature adults snuggled up somewhere in a dry warm place in our gardens.



We have five butterflies in the UK that overwinter in a dormant state as adults. They are Comma, Brimstone, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell and the Red Admiral. You may find them in your garage and sometimes even indoors, it would take a very warm day in January to tempt them outdoors. If you find an active butterfly in your house it would help to encourage it back to sleep in something like a shoe box and then once settled move it to somewhere cool like a garden shed.

Ladybirds and some Lacewings will also overwinter as adults in a dormant state. Although you may not see these in January because they will be hunkering down in tree bark, a curled up leaf, in piles of leaf litter, in pine cones or cracks in rocks. Some Ladybirds hibernate in large groups and are sometimes found indoors. Like butterflies warm temperatures can bring them out of hibernation and they are better removed to a cooler environment. These insects are not only pollinators but many adults and larvae are also voracious predators of garden pests such as aphids and scale insects. If you currently use pesticides to

get rid of aphids then it will also eradicate these beneficial insects from your garden. Leaving corners of uncleared leaves and piles of dead wood or building a bug hotel will help them through the winter months.

*Bay Tree Laurus Nobilis loved by pollinators
This ladybird seemed to be snuggled down
ready for spring*

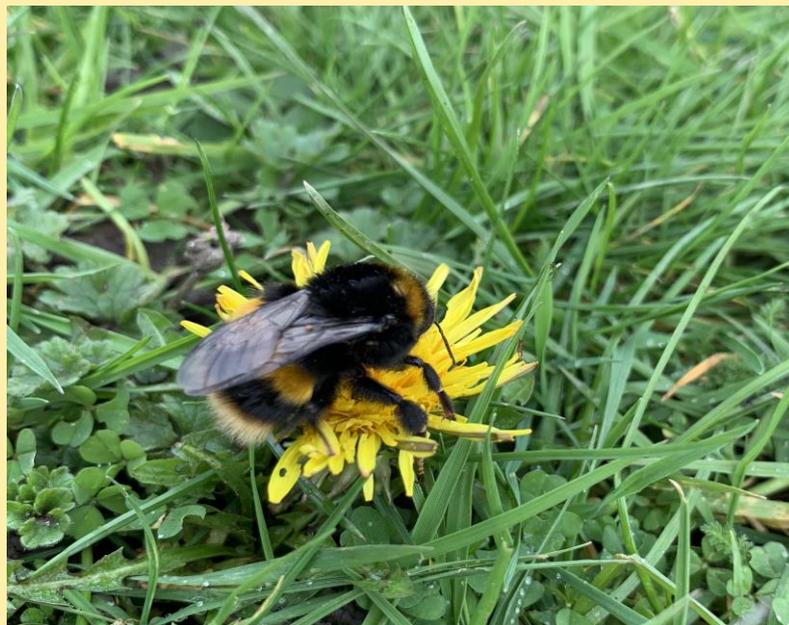
You may encounter the male Winter moth in your porch light as they are tough enough to withstand cold temperatures. Their sole purpose is to find a non flying female that will lay its eggs on a host tree. Although the caterpillar of this moth may be an unwelcome addition to your fruit trees it is an important part of an eco system providing food for our garden birds in particular our lovely Blue and Great tits.



We also have some species of Hoverfly that overwinter as adults and on a mild day this month you might encounter one, such as the Marmalade Hoverfly which can be active in winter. I'm always keen to encourage Hoverflies into my garden as they will lay their eggs near a colony of aphids and the larvae will go on to devour a large amount of aphids before pupating into an adult. Yarrow is a popular pollen and nectar source that is available in winter for early Hoverflies.

During this wet cold start to 2021 I haven't even laid eyes on a Buff-tail bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris*), which is the only known bumblebee that can be winter active in the South of England. An autumn new Queen might choose to start a new nest rather than hibernate for winter. More often sighted in urban gardens it is still worth looking out for it in the rural garden.

A stunning Queen Buff-tailed bumblebee (Bombus terrestris) foraging on a dandelion in my garden



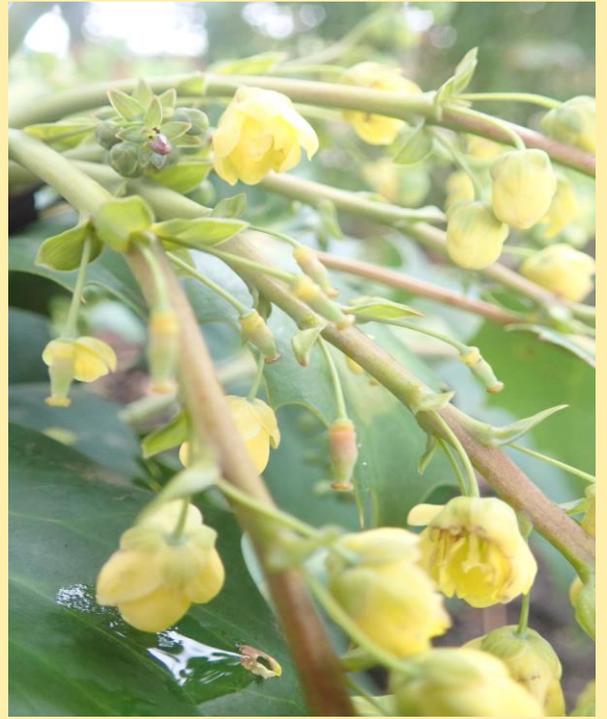
I eagerly await the flowering of the many snowdrops I have planted which always lifts my spirit in January especially knowing they will go on to be the first fresh supply of pollen in my garden. I also have many different Hellebores with the single flowers that are preferred by bees. These are still in bud at the moment along with my Daphnes, Goats Willow and the colourful Catkins of the Mount Aso Willow. Willows are a plentiful early source of pollen. January for me is usually about watching bulbs such as *Iris reticulata* and *Crocus tommasinianus* poking through the soil and buds forming on shrubs that I know will be an important source of pollen as Queen bumblebees come out of hibernation in the coming months.

Whilst I still await the aforementioned I am still enjoying watching my 'Wisley Cream' *Clematis cirrhosis* clambering up my dead cherry tree in the garden. It is a winter flowering evergreen with masses of flowers and after four years of nothing much it is the star of the show this January! Bees prefer to forage where there are large clusters of flower and that is difficult to achieve in January. Some shrubs in winter can give you a large amount of blossom in one place especially where flowers fall short. Mahonias, Winter Flowering Jasmine, and for me a Hebe that seems to flower whenever it feels like in my garden. All of these are always a good find for a hungry Bufftailed bumblebee. Unfortunately I cannot grow Heathers on my chalky soil, but if you can these are always a good winter flowering bush with masses of flower. In January there are few pollinators about some flowering plants will use scent to lure a passing insect and for this reason many winter flowering shrubs also offer us a wonderful lift on a dull winters day with their lovely perfume. In my garden I have *Sarcococca Confusa* and *Daphne Bholua*. Plant these where you can catch their enticing scent as you pass them by. Lastly don't forget to let a few native wildflowers have their way in your lawn as they not only look pretty when the lawn is looking bleak, but a dandelion, yarrow and or thistle might help a hungry pollinator and save the day!

Wisley Cream Clematis cirrhosis, Snowdrops and Mahonia



As the temperatures have risen in the last few days of January and the sun has intermittently shone I have dallied a little longer in the garden and I was lucky enough to briefly spot a large Hoverfly checking out my Hebe. There is definitely a feel of spring in the air as snowdrops and Helebores are beginning to flower.



Maria Himsworth - Follow my sightings on Twitter @HimsworthM