

Maria Himsworth's Chillenden Blog

October 2021

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

If you have been following my blog then you will have noticed that September was missed as we left the garden to its own devices and took a long awaited journey up to the Northern Highlands of Scotland to enjoy a few weeks in a very different environment along the coastal roads of this beautiful country. I must of course mention that one of my highlights was to see that in one of the most northerly parts of the UK the Bumblebee Conservation Trust is protecting another of our rarest Bumblebees, the Great Yellow Bumblebee, *Bombus distinguendus*. It could not be further apart from the Southeast corner of the UK where I live and support the work they are doing there to provide

habitat for the Shrill Carder Bee, *Bombus sylvarum*. Although it was too late in the year to go Yellow Bumblebee hunting we found a wonderful area of grassland near Strathnaver called Farr Glebe on the amazing Farr Beach where local people were working together to provide habitat for these rare bees.



What was buzzing in October

October is the time of the year when we start to watch the garden and its wildlife slowly go to sleep. In nature this is a significant time of the year as the temperatures drop and the days become darker, and autumn explodes into a blaze of colour. I find this time of the year in my garden

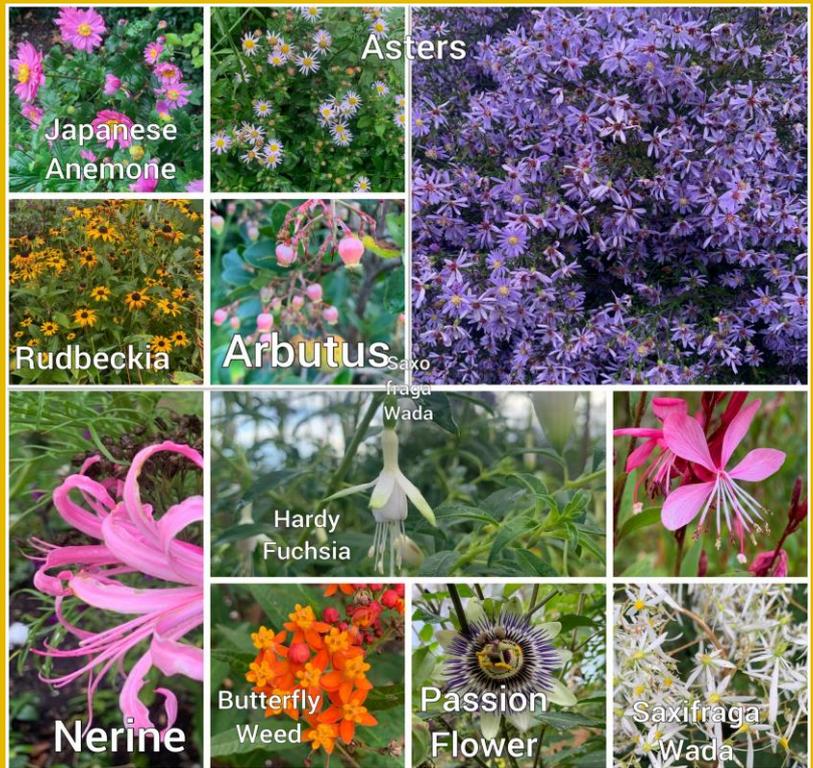
fascinating as although in some way it is the end of another cycle of life in the garden it is also the preparation for the start of a new one. It is always tempting to get out there and tidy and clear away the debris that was this year's beauty, but I have learnt over time that this is not the best use of my time in the garden in autumn. Instead, now in autumn I stand back and admire what nature is doing naturally and look forward to next year's beauty and use the time to help nature stay cosy and alive over winter.

For pollinators autumn is a time where in one way or another most will go into hibernation or a state of diapause until winter is over and new life can begin again next spring. Every mowing event and leaf raking session will reduce the amount of habitat available in your garden for overwintering insects. Therefore, try and consider the whole ecosystem in your garden and how you can both protect it whilst at the same time improve it so that next year your garden is buzzing with even more pollinators.

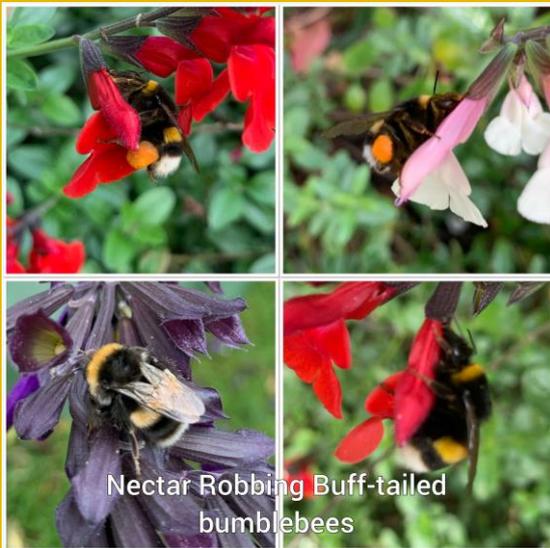
So how can the way you manage your garden in autumn help next year's pollinators? It is interesting to observe what is still buzzing in October as pollinators have different life cycles dependant on temperatures and food availability. Some *Bombus terrestris* are now known to continue to be active in winter in some urban areas.

Throughout October on warm sunny days there were still plenty of Bumblebees in the garden although only a few species continue foraging into October and most nests die off in Autumn and only the Queens will hibernate having already mated. In my rural garden I have had both *Bombus lapidarius* the Red-tailed and *Bombus terrestris* the Buff-tailed Queens buzzing around trying to stock

up their fat reserves as much as possible before going into hibernation. These fat reserves need to be enough to see them through the winter and therefore they need late flowering plants. So when planning next year's flower beds make sure you include some late flowering plants. Both of these species have short tongues and it has been interesting observing their feeding habits. For the first time this year I planted numerous Cosmos in the garden, and they have proven a favourite with these short tongued species. I have always loved Salvias in particular the hardy varieties that last well in to Autumn. These have a long corolla tube and need long tongued bees such as *Bombus hortorum*, the Garden Bumblebee to pollinate their flowers. However, in my garden the Buff-tails seem to find it easy to 'rob' the nectar from these flowers. It's called nectar robbing as they don't actually pollinate the flower whilst feeding in this



way as they don't enter the flower through the tube instead, they pierce a hole at the base of the corolla drinking the nectar from the outside of the flower. I've seen Honeybees do the same this autumn, I also observed a honeybee working its way around the petals of a rose bud until it completely disappeared inside the bud, I hope it got its reward! These bumblebees will need a dry warm place to hibernate over winter usually underground in loose soil often choosing a north facing bank so they don't get woken by warm winter sunshine.



Nectar Robbing Buff-tailed bumblebees

There are plenty of Hoverfly around still in October. I still struggle with the id of these numerous beautiful insects that are so beneficial as pollinators with the added benefit of some species eating up your aphids as they develop into adults. Hoverflies have many different ways of surviving winter. Some will hide as fully grown larvae ready to gobble up your aphids in spring. Some of the earlier ones to

appear in spring will have overwintered as adults hiding in warm crevices. There are also hoverflies that have an aquatic larvae stage living in wet rot holes of dead tree stumps and smelly water holes.

Bombus pascourum, the Common Carder bee were about earlier in October but had completely disappeared by the last week of October. Carder bees have longer tongues so there were plenty of Salvias for them to forage on although they were again mostly on the Cosmos this month in the garden.



A honeybee working it's way into A rose bud



When you remove leaves from your borders you remove a natural process that builds and enriches the soil whilst protecting it over winter. It is also a habitat for so many life forms, leaving your leaf fall allows the next generation of many species of pollinators with a place to survive the worst of the winter cold concealed in the leaf litter until the warmth of spring awakes them. So many of our insects species that carry out vital roles in our garden spend winter in our leaf piles. Some insects will lay their eggs in the soil and the litter, while many will pause their life cycle in a pupae or larvae stage in litter, in wood bark and other crevices and shelters, whilst some overwinter as adults simply hidden in the leaves. If you're worried about the overwintering pests then think about the predators that are also snuggled down in these leaf piles, like spiders and beetles keeping it all in check. One great pollinator that might be snuggled in your leaf piles as an adult is the beautiful Lacewings, *Neuroptera*, they overwinter as adults and their delicate bodies really do need somewhere snug to hibernate overwinter. They are voracious consumers of aphids in spring.



If you reduce the amount of digging and turning over your soil this will help those insects that lay their eggs or hide in the soil as larvae. Log piles and dead wood can be hidden in the garden or used to make lovely displays whilst slowly degrading back into the ground with the help of our decomposers. By piling logs, you will produce different types of habitat from damp wet rotting wood towards the bottom for woodlice, beetles and frogs to dry logs on top where insects such as ladybirds can hide.



Butterflies and Moths have many overwintering strategies to survive the winter including a few that migrate to warmer climates. Many Butterflies overwinter as caterpillars in your garden among vegetation and some will even continue to feed on warmer days. Some examples are the Small Copper, Meadow Brown and Speckled Wood. Examples of Butterflies that overwinter as pupae are Holly Blue and the Orange Tip. I have spotted some of the five overwintering Butterflies in my garden this Autumn including the Small Tortoiseshell and Red Admirals feeding up before hibernating as adults. If you have apple trees in your garden and leave your fallen fruit it will not only provide vital food for birds such as thrushes but also for Butterflies that are active in autumn such as the Red Admirals.

One area I do cut back in Autumn is my mini meadow as cutting and removing the summer growth of grasses and flowers reduces the vigour of the grasses and allows the flowering species to flourish which is important for next summer's pollinators. To balance this out and to ensure the survival of some species that lay their eggs in grass I keep areas of grass around the garden long over winter to support insects such as the Caterpillars of the Speckled Wood that may feed on long grass in your garden. Grasses are important as hiding places for many pollinators along with birds and small mammals so they can move safely through the landscape and is also as a place for them to lay their eggs and provide food during development. Newly planted this year in my garden was Yellow

Toadflax, *Linaria vulgaris* only to be completely eaten in September by the caterpillar of the Toadflax brocade moth, *Calophasia lunula* which apparently also likes Purple Toadflax but even though it pops up everywhere in my garden the caterpillars only chose my newly planted Yellow ones! The plants however seem to have survived and it was good to spot a new species I hadn't seen before.

Most solitary bees have also disappeared for the year with only a few little Furrow bees hanging on into Autumn in my garden. I now have a good cover of Ivy that covers part of my Beech hedge in places and it has flowered and berried in the last couple of years which is great for so many types of wildlife. I restrict its cover to allowing it to ramble through and under the hedges cutting back anything that starts creeping into the borders. Bees, Butterflies, Moths, Hoverflies and even Wasps love Ivy. In particular the Holly Blue lays her eggs on Ivy in time for her young to feed on the new flower buds and the Ivy Bee feeds solely forage on Ivy pollen and nectar. Ivy with its thick dense cover provides hibernating and nesting for so much wildlife and birds will come along and gobble up the berries very quickly as they appear. So, love it or hate it if you can find a place for it in your garden you will be very much rewarded.

October is the month that I pack away my Bee Hotels into my garage. By storing your hotels somewhere cool and dry overwinter you will give Solitary Bees the best chance of surviving a wet and cold winter. On the 25th of October a rather large looking Furrow bee was foraging on the last of the Cosmos and *Verberna bonariensis* in the garden after further research it turned out to be a male Orange-footed Furrow Bee, *Lasioglossum xanthopus*. The largest of the *Lasioglossum* species it was a scarce find!

So this autumn rake the leaves off your grass, remove them from your ponds and sweep them off your pathways but leave nature to complete its life cycle in the rest of your garden. Enjoy the seed heads and autumn colours and watch the birds seeking out the bugs in the leaf piles and nature will thank you in the spring as winter melts away and nature burst into life once more.

If you live in Kent, Kent Wildlife Trust are planning to continue their zoom workshops this winter and into spring with lots of great ideas for pollinator friendly gardening and a chance to ask questions to the experts live. To find out more visit kentwildlifetrust.org.uk. Kent's Plan Bee also give lots of pollinator advice throughout the year including a monthly newsletter that you can find here <https://www.kent.gov.uk/environment-waste-and-planning/nature-and-biodiversity/pollinators/kents-plan-bee-pollinator-action-plan/kents-plan-bee-newsletter>



Toadflax Brocade moth caterpillars

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