

Flowers, bumblebees and other insects



On Sunday afternoon I went to the station to see a friend onto the train back to London. After I waved her off two things made me very happy. One was seeing a number of bumblebees visiting the purple thistle-like flowers of the common knapweed, which had just come into flower. One of the main reasons for establishing this wild flower area at the station was to provide nectar and pollen for bees. Bumblebees are important pollinators of some of our crop plants and there is concern that bee declines might result in a 'pollination crisis' in which there might not be enough bees to go round, causing crop yields to fall. This has already happened elsewhere in the world. Locally, in April University of Sussex researchers launched a project asking for volunteers to grow broad beans and monitor their bumblebee visitors.

The second thing that made me happy was a conversation I had with a couple from Westmeston who had just got off the train and were admiring the wild flowers before cycling home. They said it was good to see such a fine display in contrast to the roadside verges that so often are cut back just when they are full of flowering beauty.

While the causes of bumblebee declines are probably many and complex, the most important seems to be the loss of flowers and habitat. The spread of intensive farming has greatly reduced areas rich in wild flowers such as hay meadows. The Plough at the top of Plumpton Lane is managing part of its camping field as a hay meadow. The richness of its flower population suggests that it has probably never been ploughed; indeed, the 1842 Tithe Map shows it as pasture and it has probably been so ever since. Our quick survey on 7 June this year found 58 species of wild flowers and grasses, and the meadow was alive with bumblebees and butterflies, including small heath, meadow brown, common blue and small tortoiseshell.

The flower-rich area in the front of All Saints Church is also looking good at the moment, with masses of common spotted orchids as well as other hay-meadow species. It is good to see that meadow management in churchyards is gaining more support and there are some lovely examples in Sussex. I visited a churchyard in the Malling area of Lewes recently to give a guided tour of the wildflowers there. It has been managed by volunteers for some

time now and is full of flowers, which are being used as a seed source for wildflower areas in other Lewes churchyards.

If you are concerned about bumblebee declines then the best way to help is to ensure that your garden plants include those that provide nectar and pollen for these insects. This is especially important in the late winter/early spring when the queens emerge from hibernation and need good sources of pollen and nectar to rear their workers. There are lists of garden plants and wild flowers that are perfect for pollinators on the Royal Horticultural Society website at www.rhs.org.uk.

Of course, bumblebees are only one group of pollinators; we should not forget the various other bees and wasps and a whole host of beetles, flies and other insects that are important too.

Many people admired a wonderful display of wild daffodils this year, on private land but visible from the footpath between Beresford Lane and the hospice. Thanks to the co-operation of the landowner, a sample of seeds from the daffodils now resides in the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place, preserved for the future.

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