

About bumblebees

Bumblebees are among the most loved and familiar of garden insects. The sight and sound of them buzzing from flower to flower is a quintessential part of British summertime but sadly these charismatic creatures are struggling to survive. In our modern world of paved gardens and intensive agriculture our bumblebees find themselves hungry and homeless.

At the time of writing, 24 bumblebee species are found in the UK and there are plans to reintroduce the Short-haired bumblebee.

Unfortunately two UK species have become extinct in the last 80 years and others have declined dramatically. The reason for this is simple and clearly visible: there are now far fewer flowers in the countryside to provide bees with the pollen and nectar that they need to survive.

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But all is not lost – you can take action today to help save these hardworking pollinators. This factsheet explains how.

Did you know that bumblebees have smelly feet?

Well they do and it's quite useful! After feeding they leave a scent on the flower which helps other bumblebees to avoid wasting energy landing – the flower will contain very little nectar or pollen.

What's so special about the bumblebee?

To most people, bees are instantly recognisable but there are distinct differences between the appearance and lives of bumblebees, honeybees and solitary bees. Bumblebees are larger and hairier than their cousins which makes them perfectly suited for colder climates. Their extra insulation allows them to venture out on cold days when honeybees stay tucked up inside. But bumblebee nests are small and they do not store large quantities of honey, so they are more sensitive to the availability of pollen and nectar-rich flowers to feed on.

Bumblebees do not swarm and are not aggressive.

Don't confuse bumblebees with wasps or honeybees. Bumblebees do not swarm and are not aggressive. Only female bumblebees can sting and they will only do so if they feel very threatened. Importantly, bumblebees will never interrupt your picnic! Bumblebees play a vitally important role which we shouldn't take for granted. They pollinate the crops that provide us with food to eat and the colourful flowers in our landscape. Without their 'free bee' service, many wildflowers could disappear.

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Key ingredients from our diets, such as beans, peas, raspberries and tomatoes would be harder to produce and much more expensive without British bumblebees.



Buzz pollination

Only bumblebees are capable of buzz pollination. This occurs when the bee grabs the flower and produces a high-pitched buzz. This releases pollen that would otherwise stay trapped inside. Tomatoes are pollinated in this way.

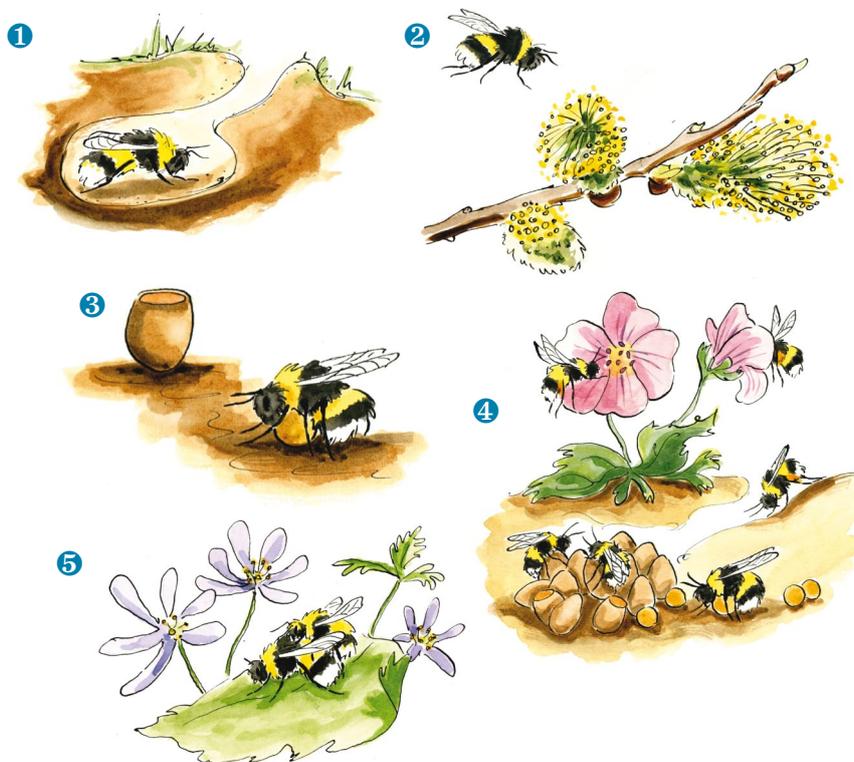
Bumblebee lifecycle

Bumblebees are social insects and live in nests of up to 400 individuals. Each nest is ruled by a queen and lasts for just one year. This is different to honeybee hives which remain active for several years.

In early spring the queen emerges from hibernation to start a new nest ①. Her first task is to build up her energy reserves so it is really important that she can find plenty of pollen and nectar-rich flowers ②. Once she has found a suitable nest site she will rear her first batch of eggs ③ – a group of female workers whose job it will be to feed and nurture the colony ④. This process is repeated throughout the summer with the queen rarely leaving the nest.

Bumblebees rarely nest in the same location two-years running.

Towards the end of the summer the queen produces male offspring, along with new queens. After mating ⑤ the males die off, as do the old queens and workers. Only the new, fertilised queens survive to hibernate through the winter and establish their own nests the following year ①. Bumblebees rarely nest in the same location two-years running.



Things you can do to help

British gardens cover more than 1 million acres and can be a lifeline for bumblebees. No matter how small your garden, you can contribute to our efforts to save the sound of summer by providing lots of bee-friendly flowers throughout the year. By bee-friendly we mean flowers that are rich in pollen and nectar. Many ornamental plants that are commonly found in British gardens, such as pansies and begonias, are of no value to wildlife. Years of cultivation for showy blooms mean that these colourful flowers often produce little pollen or nectar. There are hundreds of beautiful flowers that do offer these rewards though, including foxgloves, lavender, geraniums, herbs and wild roses that you can add to your collection.

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You can also help by supporting our work to conserve bumblebee habitats and raise public and political awareness. There are various ways to show your support including volunteering, fundraising and becoming a member of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust. For more information on all of the above, including access to our **Bee kind** gardening tool, visit bumblebeeconservation.org

Sugar water mix

If you find a stranded or sleepy bumblebee you can help to boost her energy levels with a simple sugar-water mix. Mix equal parts white sugar and warm water then pour into a small container or sponge. Place both the bee and the artificial nectar near to some flowers.