

My wildlife-friendly allotment and some suggestions to attract pollinators and other beneficial wildlife

My name is Nadine and I manage 1 1/2 allotment plots on the Fir Tree allotment site. I decided to write about my plots, which I manage as wildlife-friendly as possible and to give some tips on how to attract beneficial wildlife, and in particular pollinators, to your allotment or vegetable garden.



Cardinal beetle on Parsnip flowers



My plot in June

If you want to attract beneficial wildlife it is important that you do not use pesticides. Pesticides not only kill pests but also their predators. Ladybirds and their larvae, lacewings and hoverfly larvae will eat aphids for example, but this can only happen if there are some aphids for them to eat. Birds need lots of caterpillars to raise their chicks, but if caterpillars are killed with pesticides the chicks will starve.

On my plot, I plant flowers, vegetables and fruit together and I try to avoid planting large areas with the same vegetable. This way the vegetables are more difficult to find for pest insects, and the plot looks more interesting. If you plant the right flowers you can also attract pollinators. Single-flowered annuals such as cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*), nasturtiums (*Tropaeolus major*), pot marigolds (*Calendula officinalis*), poached-egg plant (*Limnanthes douglasii*), borage (*Borago officinalis*) and sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) are usually a good choice. Sunflowers are also great for birds which will eat the seeds in autumn and winter.



Another well-suited late-summer and autumn flowering annual is cosmos (*Cosmos* spp.). It is very attractive to bees and keeps flowering until the first frosts set in. Many annuals will self-seed if you let them do so, which means they may re-appear in the following year without the need for re-sowing. There are also many herbs that are well-liked by pollinators. For example, with wild majoram (*Oreganum vulgare*), mint (*Mentha* sp.), lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) you are almost guaranteed to see a wide range of butterflies, bees and hoverflies visiting your allotment plot. In particular, hoverflies are really keen on fennel!



Bees and butterflies like herbs such as Wild marjoram

Fruit bushes such as gooseberries, currants and blueberries; cane fruit such as raspberries, loganberries and blackberries, and small fruit trees such as apple and plum provide much needed pollen and nectar for pollinators in spring and early summer. In particular, gooseberries and blackcurrants are useful for emerging bumblebee queens, as they flower early in the year.



My plot in August

Green manure, especially if left to flower, can also provide a valuable resource for wildlife. My personal favourite green manure is phacelia (*Phacelia tanacetifolia*). You can sow it in any gap on the plot and it will quickly cover the soil. It has pretty purple flowers which are very attractive to honeybees, bumblebees and moths.



Phacelia (Green manure) and poppies flowering

Other types of green manure supporting pollinators and other wildlife include buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) and clovers such as crimson clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*), red clover (*T. pratense*) and white clover (*T. repens*). Green manure can also provide much-needed cover for ground beetles and other predators which are after slugs and other pests.

A small area planted with single-flowered biennials and perennials will look nice and is nearly maintenance-free. Especially early-flowering plants such as lungwort (*Pulmonaria* spp.), and spring bulbs such as specimen crocus (for example *C. tommasinianus*), are of high value and provide food for emerging bumblebee queens and honeybees in early spring.

If you plant late-flowering plants such as cosmos, single dahlias (*Dahlia x hybrida*) and michaelmas daisies (*Aster* spp.) you can provide a much-needed food source for young bumblebee queens preparing for hibernation and other late-flying pollinators.

Teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) is an impressive biennial plant. The flowers will attract bumblebees in summer and birds (especially goldfinches) like to eat the seeds in autumn and winter.



Teasel looks ornamental and is good for birds and bumblebees



Compost area surrounded by Comfrey

A compost area with open-sided composters provides not only compost for improving the soil but also a home for all sorts of wildlife. From tiny springtails and mites to larger worms, beetles, earwigs and centipedes to the much bigger slow-worms, toads and even hedgehogs (I once had a whole hedgehog family living in a composter); all will find a home in a compost heap to either help with decomposition, to hide during the day and gobble up pest insects in the night or to keep warm in winter. I have four wooden composters which I have surrounded with comfrey

(*Symphytum officinale*). The leaves of this plant can be used to make comfrey 'tea' which is a liquid fertiliser rich in potassium and nitrogen (the leaves are fermented in water and the resulting liquid is diluted 1:10 with water before being used). Comfrey flowers provide nectar for long-tongued bumblebees such as the Garden bumblebee (*Bombus hortorum*).

I have also left some nettles to grow around the compost area for Small Tortoiseshells and Peacock butterflies to lay their eggs on. At least the Small Tortoiseshells seem to like my nettles as every year I have hundreds of caterpillars munching through the nettle leaves until hardly any are left.

Adding water to your plot is probably one of the most important things you can do for the wildlife in your area.

It will not only give frogs, toads, newts, dragonflies, damselflies and other water-dependent animals a home but will also attract birds and mammals which will come to drink, bath or hunt for food. You do not need to build a huge pond: Any watertight container sunken into the ground and filled with rainwater will do. You just need to make sure (especially if the container has steep walls) that you always have a safe exit (such as stones or a wooden plank) for animals so they can get out again if they have fallen into the water. If you add plants such as marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) and Water forget-me-not (*Myosotis scorpioides*), your little pond will be even more attractive to wildlife. Also try to surround your pond at least on three sides with flowers to provide shelter, food and somewhere to hide for your pond wildlife.



A pond is a great way to attract wildlife



Bee hotels at my shed wall

Last but not least, if you have a shed, you can provide bee nesting boxes (also called bee hotels) for solitary bees. You can buy them or make your own by cutting bamboo canes to 10-15 cm long pieces and stuff them tight into a watertight container such as half a plastic water bottle or a tin. The bee hotel should be positioned in a sunny, sheltered place. It may take some time for the solitary bees to find the nesting box, but after about a year the bees should flock to your bee hotel, provided that you have surrounded the area with lots

of pollinator-friendly plants. Solitary bees do not sting and are completely harmless, and thus the bee hotel can even be sited next to the shed door or a sitting area.

Attracting wildlife to your plot is not difficult and does not cost much. If you avoid spraying pesticides, plant some pretty pollinator-friendly plants in between your rows of vegetables, have a herb bed and a compost area and let some of the green manure flower, you are already doing a good deal for wildlife. You will also realise that you get less pest damage and a better pollination of your crops.

You can also have a look at my allotment plots (plot number 69 and 70b) to get some more ideas, and to see if this less traditional planting style would suit you.