

Grow your own: food for you and for bumblebees

Bumblebees are fantastic pollinators of a huge variety of fruit and vegetable plants, including tomatoes, strawberries, and pumpkins!

By growing your own food, you can help provide more nectar- and pollen-rich flowers for bumblebees to feed on. The flowers which have been pollinated then develop into delicious fresh fruits and vegetables for you to enjoy.

So feed the bumblebees, and they help feed you. It's a win-win situation!

About this guide





Something for everyone – everyone can grow their own food, from a few tomato plants in pots to an allotment bursting with produce! Use this guide to help you choose the right plants for you and your growing space, [big or small](#).

Keeping it simple – if you're new to growing food, the amount of advice out there can feel overwhelming. We've picked the plants we think are best for beginners (and bumblebees!), and provided the [key information you need to get started](#).

Variety is the spice of life – fruit and vegetable plants come in many different varieties, so you can always find one to suit you. Dwarf varieties are great for small spaces and containers. Lots of crops also have early, mid and late season varieties which flower and produce fruit/vegetables at different times. If you plant a mix, you can [both help feed bumblebees and harvest for yourself](#) over a longer season!

Buying plants: cost vs. convenience

You can buy food plants at different stages of their life cycle:

Cost		
 Seeds	£	Some can be sown directly outdoors. Some need to be planted indoors or under cover first, then planted outside once they have grown for a few weeks. Growing from seed is a great way to save money and very satisfying!
 Plug plants	££	Young plants that have been grown individually – they come in different sizes. Seedlings or mini plugs can be transferred into pots to keep growing for a few weeks before planting out. Larger plugs can be planted directly outdoors. They can be more fuss-free and reliable than growing from seed.
 Potted plants	£–£££	Bigger, older plants in containers. They can usually be planted directly outdoors. Cost depends on plant – vegetables are relatively cheap, soft fruits and fruit trees are more expensive.
 Bare-root plants (soft fruits & fruit trees)	££	These plants have been dug up while they are not actively growing (dormant) so they look a bit strange! They are cheaper than potted plants but usually only available to buy in winter, and must be planted between November and early March. Many won't produce fruit until following years.

Always try to choose **organic, pesticide-free** plants and seeds – these are best for bumblebees. Ask for advice at your local garden centre or nursery, or search online for mail-order seed and plant companies.

Key for icons used in the guide



Fruit and vegetables

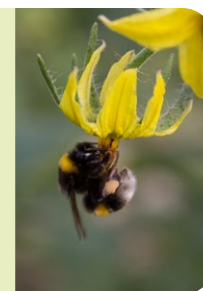
Nothing tastes better than food which has come directly from the plant to the plate! You may even find treats like tomatoes and strawberries don't make it into the house...













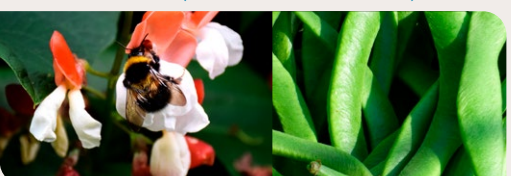


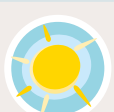
For some crops like peas and beans, it's a great idea to stagger sowing the seeds every few weeks, so your plants flower and fruit at different times.

Did you know?

Nearly every tomato you've ever eaten has been pollinated by a bumblebee!

















Tomatoes keep their pollen locked inside tube-shaped 'anthers'. To release it, bumblebees clamp their mouths onto the tomato's anther and vibrate their wing muscles hard until the pollen bursts out! This is called **buzz pollination**, and in the UK only bumblebees can do this.



	Buy as...	Planting time*	Where to plant	Sunny/shady?	Grow in a small space	Top tips!
Strawberries (<i>Fragaria species</i>) 		Apr–Jun			Happy in pots, hanging baskets and window boxes. Make sure pots are deep and at least 15cm wide for one strawberry plant. Alternatively plant 6–8 strawberries per growing bag.	Strawberries need watering regularly for a few weeks after planting and during hot, dry weather. Using an organic high potassium liquid feed (like tomato feed) every week or fortnight will help flowers and fruit to form.
Tomatoes (<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i>) 		Apr–May	 (outdoor varieties only)		Choose compact 'bush' type tomatoes for pots and hanging baskets. Their stems trail down and don't need supporting.	If you are growing tall ('cordon' type) tomatoes, remove some leaves under the growing fruits so more sunlight and air can reach them. Tomatoes need regular watering and feeding weekly with organic liquid tomato feed .
French bean (<i>Phaseolus vulgaris</i>) 		May–Jun (sow outdoors)			Dwarf varieties are great for pots. Climbing varieties can be grown in larger containers with support, producing lots of food in a small patch of ground.	French beans can be eaten in two ways . Pick the young pods after about eight weeks to eat them, or let them dry on the plant to get haricot beans!
Runner beans (<i>Phaseolus coccineus</i>) 		May–Jun (sow outdoors)			Dwarf varieties are great for pots. Climbing varieties can be grown in larger containers with a strong support, producing lots of food in a small patch of ground.	Pick the beans before they reach 15–20cm long or they will become stringy. This will also encourage more flowers to form for bumblebees!

* Guide only, please refer to instructions on your new plants or seeds.



	Buy as...	Planting time*	Where to plant	Sunny/shady?	Grow in a small space	Top tips!
Broad beans (<i>Vicia faba</i>) 		Mar–May (sow outdoors) or Oct–Nov for hardy varieties			Only dwarf varieties are suitable for large pots and containers.	When several sets of flowers have formed, snap off the leafy tips of the plants to prevent blackfly (a pest which can 'move into' this part of the plant). You can eat the tips steamed, stir-fried, or in a salad or soup!
Peas (<i>Pisum sativum</i>) 		Mar–Jun (sow outdoors)			Dwarf varieties are great for pots and don't need supporting with stakes. Choose a sheltered spot.	Soak the seeds in water before sowing so they start growing quickly (mice can sometimes dig up the seeds and eat them). You can also sow extra seeds or start a few growing indoors as back up.
Courgettes (<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>) 		Apr–May (sow indoors) then May–Jun (plant outdoors)			Courgettes spread so use a large growing bag rather than a pot. You can also try climbing varieties which can be trained up a stake.	Plants need watering regularly to produce female flowers (the ones which turn into courgettes). But bumblebees will happily feed from both male and female flowers!
Squash & pumpkins (<i>Cucurbit species</i>) 		Apr–May (sow indoors) then Jun–Jul (plant outdoors)			Containers should be at least 45cm wide. Smaller squash varieties (with fruits no bigger than a football) can be trained to grow upwards on strong supports, like a trellis or tripod made of strong wooden poles (not bamboo).	When the fruits start to grow, pop some bricks, straw, or a piece of tile under them to keep them off the damp soil. Check underneath regularly for slugs and snails who may be hiding there!

Planting seeds indoors

Sow your courgette, squash or pumpkin seeds into large pots (one seed per pot) filled with peat-free compost. You can re-use things like big yoghurt pots – just punch a few drainage holes in the bottom.

Keep the pots on a warm, sunny windowsill to help the seeds sprout, then transfer them outside once they have grown big enough.










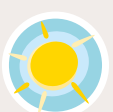



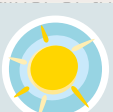
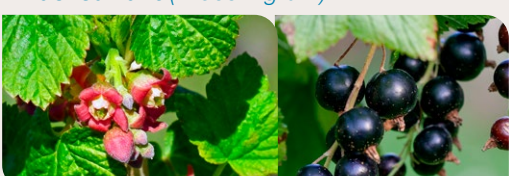







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Soft fruits

Bursting with flavour, berries and currants are a delicious addition to any space! Picking your own will make you even happier when you consider how much they normally cost at the supermarket.

	Buy as...	Planting time*	Where to plant	Sunny/shady	Grow in a small space	Top tips!
Blueberry (<i>Vaccinium corymbosum</i>) 					These compact plants are great for small spaces. Choose a large pot at least 30cm wide.	Blueberries need acidic soil . If your garden doesn't have it, grow in a pot with peat-free ericaceous (acidic) compost. Water with rainwater (tap water can change the soil acidity).
Raspberry (<i>Rubus idaeus</i>) 		Potted plants: Plant anytime throughout the year, though they will settle best from late autumn-early spring. Bare-root: Plant from Nov-Mar. Avoid planting if the soil is frozen or very wet.			Dwarf varieties look like bushes and can be grown in large containers at least 40cm wide. They can be easily supported with short bamboo canes or sticks.	Don't plant raspberries too deep – the first roots should be no more than 5cm below the soil. Raspberries are best picked and eaten on the same day, but they also freeze really well!
Blackberry (<i>Rubus fruticosus</i>) 					Compact, thornless varieties can be grown in larger pots.	Cultivated plants produce sweeter, tastier fruits than the wild variety (brambles), and can be trained along walls and fences using wire.
Blackcurrant (<i>Ribes nigrum</i>) 					Choose a compact variety and grow in a large, deep container.	Pick your blackcurrants on a dry day so they don't go mouldy. Snip off whole bunches using scissors instead of picking individual berries.
Redcurrant/Whitecurrant (<i>Ribes rubrum</i>) 					Can be grown in large, deep containers. Choose a compact 'bush' variety or buy a tall, space-saving 'single cordon' which fruits along one main stem. Cordons need support from bamboo canes, or a wall/fence.	Redcurrants like cooler temperatures , so are great for colder sites. Pick your currants on a dry day so they don't go mouldy. Snip off whole bunches using scissors instead of picking individual berries.

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Fruit trees

Fruit trees produce masses of nectar-rich blossom, so they are one of the best things you can add to your space for hungry bumblebees! You will also attract other important pollinators like solitary bees.

Apple (*Malus* species)

Pear (*Pyrus communis*)

Plum (*Prunus domestica*)

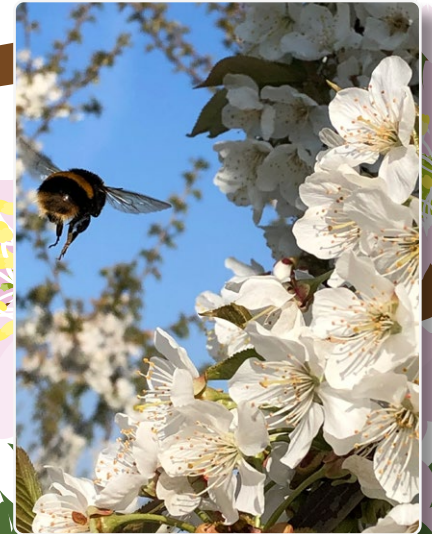
Sweet or Sour cherry (*Prunus avium* or *cerasus*)

Peach (*Prunus persica*)

Nectarine (*Prunus persica* var. *nucipersica*)

Apricot (*Prunus armeniaca*)

With so much choice on offer, it's a good idea to research the tree you want to buy to see what would suit you best.



A tree for every space

When you think of fruit trees, you may think of an orchard. But in fact there are lots of varieties which are specially grown for smaller spaces like patios and balconies! Here are some great options – most can be ordered online or from specialist nurseries:

- **Miniature and dwarf trees** – small trees suitable for large containers.

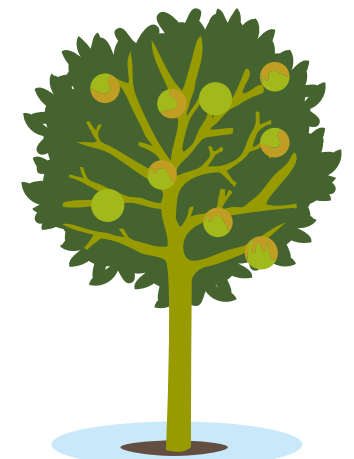


- **Column/supercolumn trees** – slender trees which produce lots and lots of fruit on a single stem. Suitable for large containers.



- **'Cordon' trees** – tall, slender trees. Need support from a wall or fence, or a strong stake if grown in the open or a container.

- **Fan or 'espalier'-trained trees** – these grow flat against a wall or fence. You can train them yourself or buy them ready-trained.



- **Standard fruit tree** – full-sized trees for larger spaces.

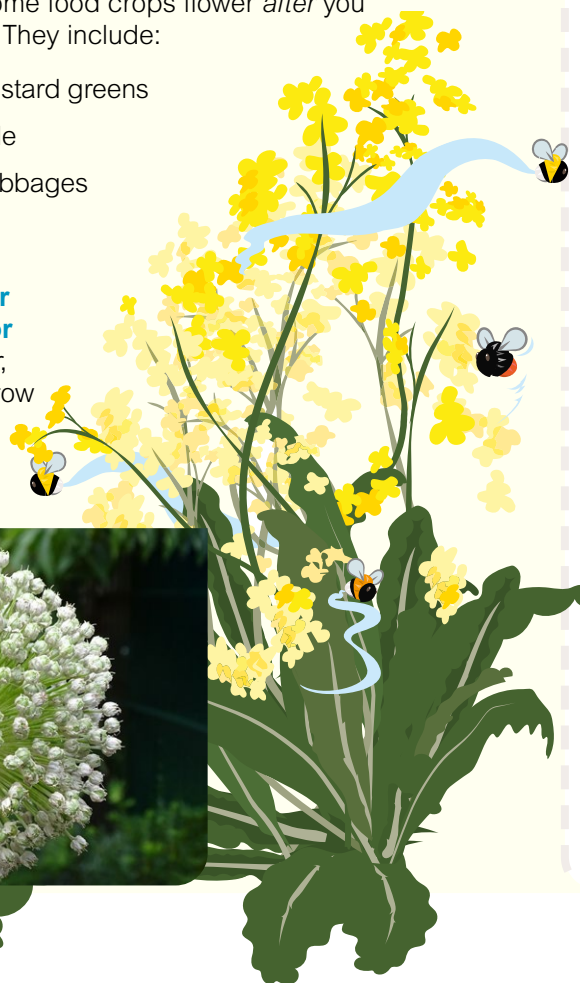


Crops to leave 'bee' for bumblebees

All of the plants listed above flower before you pick the fruits or vegetables, so you can bring in the harvest knowing you've already helped to feed bumblebees. But some food crops flower *after* you would normally pick and eat them! They include:

- Onions
- Mustard greens
- Leeks
- Kale
- Globe artichokes
- Cabbages

If you grow any of these, **harvest some of your plants for the dinner table but leave others to flower for bumblebees**. By letting them flower, you can also collect the seeds to grow more food next year – it's free and sustainable.



Environmentally-friendly gardening

- Always choose peat-free compost – this is best for the planet.
- Use plant feeds containing natural, organic materials.



For more planting ideas, check out our other Bee the Change resources bumblebeeconservation.org/beethechange

Top five companion plants

'Companion planting' means growing particular flowers alongside your crops to give them a helping hand! **All these companion plants will attract bumblebees to help pollinate your food**, and some can naturally help keep away 'pests' too. As a bonus they are all edible!



Pot marigold (calendula) – flowers over a long period and you can eat the flowers in salads.



Nasturtiums – attract caterpillars and aphids away from cabbages, cauliflowers and beans. Eat the peppery flowers and leaves in salads.



Chives – grow alongside carrots as the strong smell confuses carrot fly.



Borage – a bumblebee superfood! The edible flowers taste vaguely of cucumber and look pretty in cocktails.



Sunflowers – dwarf varieties available. You can eat the seeds or leave them for the birds.

