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The autumn and winter months can be challenging for our hardworking pollinators... but we can all do something to help bumblebees survive and thrive.

In autumn, bumblebee colonies come to their natural end, and newly-mated queens search for places to hibernate. However, for some species such as the Buff-tailed bumblebee, winter can be just as busy. In warmer spots of the UK, active winter colonies of the Buff-tailed bumblebee are recorded frequently – even in near freezing temperatures. This is why it's important to keep your patch a haven for bumblebees, with food available throughout the seasons.



Autumn jobs

Pull up your annual plants after they have self-seeded

This helps create room for new annuals to grow in the coming spring, providing new vibrant colour and food for bumblebees.

Top tip: Autumn is a great time to collect and dry out seeds, ready to be sown the following spring.

Leave the stems of perennial plants to overwinter

By retaining dry stems and seed heads of perennial plants in winter, you'll provide homes and food for wildlife. This keeps your plants healthy too, as it prevents them becoming smothered by fallen vegetation – helping to avoid fungus and rot.

Top tip: Remember to remove any falling or rotting leaves and stems.

Lift and divide large perennials

By dividing large perennials into smaller new plants and re-planting to fill any gaps, you'll get double the plant for free!

Top tip: Gift some to a friend, helping to provide pollen and nectar for bumblebees in their garden too.

Leave logs, leaves and compost heaps undisturbed

Leaving areas undisturbed provides potential habitats for newly-mated bumblebee queens in search of the perfect hibernation spot.

Top tip: Fill in empty spaces with small twigs, pieces of moss or a few leaves to keep it cosy.

Let an area of grass grow wild

Lots of our bumblebee species like to make use of long, thick grass and some emerging queens even use old rodent holes to nest in spring and summer. By leaving a patch to grow wild in autumn, you'll be providing overwintering habitat for the benefit of many insects.

Top tip: Choose a small patch to start with so it's easier to maintain.



Mulch your flower beds with organic matter

This will help with moisture retention, weed suppression and protect new growth and plant crowns of more tender plants from frost, leading to healthier flowers ready to energise bumblebees next year.

Top tip: Gather leaves, grass clippings, moss and wood chip in your garden to create your own mulch!



Winter jobs



Plant low-cost fruit trees

These trees are currently in their winter dormant phase, so you can buy them as bare-root stock ready for planting. Once established, fruit trees will be buzzing with bumblebees in early spring – providing you with an abundance of fruit later in the year.

Many trees need two of the same type (i.e., two apples) in order for cross pollination to produce fruit.

Top tip: If you already have fruit trees, prune them back to remove any dead or damaged wood, which you could add to your habitat pile!

Avoid digging up your soil

Queen bumblebees may be tucked away hibernating underground in your garden (lucky you!) – so it's best to be on the safe side and avoid disturbing the soil if possible, just until they are ready to emerge in spring.

If you do happen to disturb a hibernating queen, whilst preparing the ground for next year, try not to worry. If the bumblebee isn't too active, you can cover it up again using the material that had been hiding it, as loosely as possible.

Top tip: If the bee remains active and won't go back into hibernation, you can help her on her way by leaving her in a sheltered place to rest, such as under some leaf-litter.

Grow ivy for pollinators

This is a great way to provide some much-needed shelter from heavy rain showers, as well as a vital source of nectar and pollen for any busy bumblebees and other pollinators still hard at work.

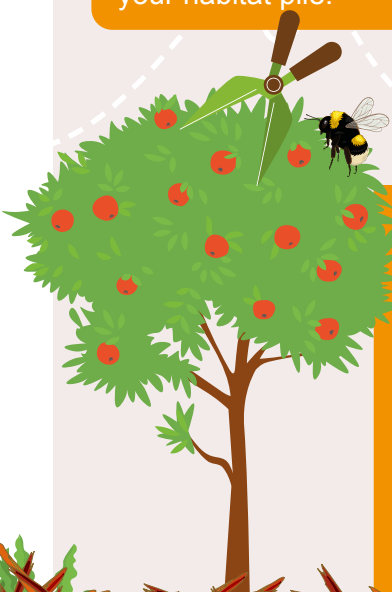
Top tip: Keep ivy well maintained on walls and fences. Don't forget to only cut back after flowering around December time.



Winter is a wonderful time to sit back and reflect on what has worked well in your space, and to plan what you'll grow next year.

Remember, it doesn't matter about the size or location of your outdoor space, or even what it looks like. It's all about the habitat and food you can offer local bumblebees, and how it helps support them throughout the seasons. You don't have to achieve everything mentioned in the job lists above, just doing what you can will help fuel the active bumblebees in your patch.

Try to create a balance between not being overly tidy (as you want to leave plenty of wild spots available for bumblebees to take shelter, nest and feed), whilst maintaining your garden in a way that suits you.



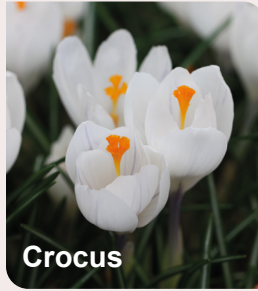
What will you plant in autumn?



Allium



Native bluebell



Crocus



Grape hyacinth



Native wild daffodil



Mahonia



Primrose



Snake's head fritillary



Snowdrop



Strawberry tree



Tulip



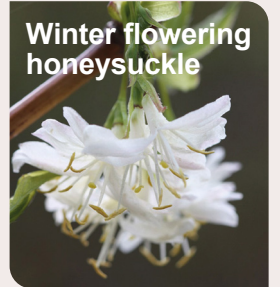
Pussy willow



Winter aconite



Winter flowering heather



Winter flowering honeysuckle

Planting advice

Plant your organic spring-flowering bulbs in autumn

These could include crocus, snake's head fritillary, alliums, grape hyacinth, daffodils, tulips, snowdrops and bluebells.

Top tip: Only use native wild daffodils with large, open flowers – ideal for easy access to pollen and nectar, and choose the native variety of bluebells too.

Grow more plants in autumn by taking cuttings

By taking cuttings from your existing flowers, you can quickly multiply the number of them in your garden – particularly useful if they are slightly harder to grow from seeds.

Top tip: Take cuttings just after leaf fall, or just before the first buds emerge.

Provide winter flowering plants

Some bee-friendly favourites to consider include winter aconite, mahonia, primrose, strawberry tree, pussy willow, winter-flowering heather and winter-flowering honeysuckle.

Top tip: Mahonia is a versatile, shade loving evergreen plant, which comes in all shapes and sizes. Mahonia has the potential to spread outside gardens so should be pruned soon after flowering.

To get started, why not take a look at our bumblebee menus and discover what you can plant for these very important pollinators each month of the year – **ideal for beginner gardeners and freely available on our Bee the Change website!**



They are happy in most soil types, although do not really like being grown in containers. Each year we receive reports of winter-active bumblebees foraging on mahonia, so they can provide real value. Try varieties 'Buckland' and 'Apollo'.



Write your gardening notes here...

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