Planting for pollinators in a village: what earns its place



A village has more room for bees and butterflies than it first appears. Add up the verges, the churchyard, the school grounds, the hedges along the lanes and every back garden, and the total is often larger than the nearest nature reserve. What matters is not one grand wildflower meadow but a steady supply of flowers from the first warm days of March to the last mild days of November, with somewhere to nest and feed in between.

Britain has around 270 species of bee, and most of them are solitary bees that never see a hive. Add hoverflies, moths and butterflies and the list of visitors runs into the hundreds. They do not all want the same flowers, and they do not all fly in the same months, so the most useful question for any patch of ground is simple. What is in flower here in each month of the year?

Start with the hungry gaps

Midsummer looks after itself. The hard times are early spring, when queen bumblebees come out of hibernation with nothing in reserve, and autumn, when most gardens have gone over.

For early spring, nothing beats a goat willow. Its catkins open in March and are covered in bees on the first sunny morning. Blackthorn follows in the hedges, and at ground level primroses, lungwort and crocus carry the load. A few dandelions left on a lawn until they have flowered do more good in April than most things bought in a pot.

For autumn, the answer is already on most old walls. Ivy flowers from September into November and feeds late bees, hoverflies and red admirals when almost nothing else is open. Mature ivy only flowers once it has climbed and bushed out, so an old plant on a wall or a tree is worth leaving alone.

Hedges do the most for the least

A mixed native hedge is the best value planting a village can make. Hawthorn, blackthorn, hazel, field maple, dog rose and guelder rose between them give blossom from March to June, then berries and hips for birds through winter. The plants are sold as bare root whips from November to March, cost very little each, and establish faster than larger pot grown plants.

How the hedge is cut matters as much as what is in it. Hawthorn flowers on the previous year's growth, so a hedge trimmed hard every year gives little blossom and few berries. Cutting each side every second or third year, in late winter and well outside the nesting season, keeps it tidy and lets it flower.



Verges, greens and the corner nobody mows

Wildflowers do best on poor soil, which is why a rich lawn does not turn into a meadow when the mowing stops. The method that works on a verge or the edge of a green is to cut once in late summer and rake the cuttings away. Taking the cuttings off lowers the fertility a little each year, and the grasses slowly give ground to knapweed, oxeye daisy, field scabious, red clover and birdsfoot trefoil.

Yellow rattle helps the process along. It is a native annual that takes part of its food from the roots of grasses and weakens them. Sow it in autumn onto short, scratched turf, because the seed needs a cold winter before it will germinate.

Leave something for the caterpillars

Butterflies need more than nectar. Peacocks, small tortoiseshells and red admirals lay their eggs on nettles, so a sunny nettle patch behind the shed is not neglect. Orange tips use garlic mustard and cuckooflower, and the common blue uses birdsfoot trefoil.

Three small things anyone can do

Choose single flowers over doubles. A double flower has swapped its pollen and nectar for extra petals, and bees pass it by.

Plant in drifts. A square metre of one plant is easier for a bee to find and work than the same number of plants dotted about.

Leave some mess. A bare, sunny bank suits mining bees, hollow stems left standing over winter shelter solitary bees, and a log pile in the shade suits almost everything else.

For anyone planning something larger, such as a school border or a new stretch of hedge, there is a fuller plant list with notes on buying in quantity at uk.hortosapp.com/guides/native-and-pollinator-plants-for-community-plantings-in-the-uk.

Megan Graham writes for HortOS, a free directory of UK wholesale plant growers with their published availability and trade prices.