

Information Sheet: Bumble Bees

General information:

Bumble Bees are a familiar sight during the summer in town and in the country. They are attractive insects and more amenable than honey bees as they do not sting unless really provoked.

Bumble Bees are furry, round, colourful and can be larger than honey bees. They make a loud buzz which can be disconcerting. They do not swarm.

Creation and Life of a Colony:

In Spring, the large Queens will be seen flying about looking for a suitable place to start a colony.

Bumble Bees prefer dark, dry places such as old mouse nests, compost heaps, spaces under sheds and houses or paving stones and even on the ground in rough grass.

The Queen has to start the colony on her own. She lays eggs which will develop into workers. She initially does all the work of making wax cells for the eggs, collecting food (nectar and pollen), feeding the larvae and defending the nest. If the weather is very wet or cold, her work may end in failure and she must start again. The colony is small compared to a hive of honey bees.

On sunny days in February the *B. terrestris* and *B. pratorum* can be seen looking for food in flowers such as willow and crocus.

From April the workers start emerging. They are similar to the queen but smaller. The males come later and may or may not be the same colouring.

Lastly, new queens are born in July & August.

All groups of workers can be seen in June and July but by August and September usually only the red tailed brown and carder species remain.

The colonies die out and the new mated queens find a suitable sheltered/dry place to overwinter.

As a rough guide, the nests of common species such as *B. terrestris* & *B. pratorum* usually in a covered locality, such as underground, in or under sheds within buildings etc., and are vacated by early August.

The nests of carder bees are usually on the surface of the ground (typically in long vegetation/grass) covered in dried grass and moss and are vacated in October.

Pollination by Bumble Bees:

Bumble Bees are important pollinators but they have been on the decline in recent years and farmers have had to change the crops that they grow, such as red clover, as they were getting insufficient pollination. They are good pollinators of field beans and rape.

In commercial glasshouses Bumble Bees are kept, in special boxes, for pollinating tomatoes, strawberries, peppers etc. This is made possible in all seasons by immersing the queen in CO₂ for 24 hours, after which she thinks that spring has come and starts nest building, whatever the season?

In our gardens they are **essential**, along with honey bees, for pollination of apple trees, blackcurrants, peas and sweet cherry as well as coriander, celery, fennel, melon, marrow, pumpkin and kiwi fruit. They are **important** for plum trees, raspberries, and broad beans and **beneficial** in pollinating aubergines, blackberries, gooseberries, peaches, peppers, currants and grapevines.

The seven common types of Bumble Bee in this country:

<i>Bombus terrestris</i>	black with yellow stripes and a pale tail
<i>Bombus lucorum</i>	black with yellow stripes and a white tail
<i>Bombus hortorum</i>	black with yellow stripes and a white tail
<i>Bombus pratorum</i>	black with 2 yellow stripes and a red, buff or brown tail
<i>Bombus lapidarius</i>	black with a red tail
<i>Bombus ruderatus</i>	black with a red tail
<i>Bombus pascuorum</i>	brown/ginger and black

Removal of a Bees Nest:

If a colony is in a very inconvenient place, it can be removed and put in a box (large bird box) and taken to an allotment or to a garden with a secluded spot. It must be about a mile away or the foragers will return to their old home. It is beneficial to leave a nest alone, undisturbed.

In this way bees and humans live in harmony.

They will not bother you if you do not bother them.