

A Choice between Friends

I like Honey, and providing that there is a reasonable distance between us I like bees. I even thought at one time that it would be nice to become a bee keeper. I began to spend time with a friendly gentleman who had a lot of hives. Unfortunately after several bee stings it became apparent that I was allergic to bee stings and as each incident was worse than the previous one, my friend advised me to give up the idea.

However when the blossom opens on the Prunus Accolade in spring I love to stand beneath the trees and listen to the Hum of the Honey Bees. There are at that season few flowers available and so on sunny days the bees come in large numbers to gather the early harvest. For the rest of the year there are far fewer honey bees in the garden, I suppose as more flowers open we share the bees with other gardens and of course there is the Oil Seed Rape.

This year as last year there are an abundance of apples and soft fruits however the honey bees probably did not fertilise the blossom. Much of that work is done by hover flies, bumble bees and other insects. The honey bee lives in large colonies and stores honey and these stocks of honey enable it to survive the winter and inclement weather. In fact it is a bit like us if the weather is bad it relies on its food stocks and avoids going out to find more.

It is a little unfortunate that so much is said and written about the importance of the honey bee as a pollinator. It is true that honey bees do pollinate a lot of flowers to produce fruit and seed but to suggest that without them there would be no fruit and seed is quite wrong. Honey bees, because they live in large colonies in hives, are the only bees that can be taken to the fields and orchards where large areas of flowering crops which need fertilisation in a short period of time are grown. Taking bees to them ensures that there will be lots of bees whilst the crop is in flower. It is then possible to move them on to another crop which needs their attention. It is for this reason that the idea of the honey bee as the primary pollinator in fields and orchards has become established. In gardens and in areas of mixed cultivation where the services of the bees are required less intensively and where nectar becomes available throughout the warm season as successive flowers open, honey bees can take their place with the vast population of other pollinating insects.

There are more than two hundred species of bees in the British Isles and most of them do not live in colonies but are solitary. Each nest is made by a single female

and although some bees locate their nests in close proximity to each other only Honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) and Bumble bees (*Bombus*) are truly social. They live in colonies. Queen bumble bees are the only bumble bees that survive through the winter and they spend the time alone in holes beneath the ground or in wood and leaf litter in sheltered places. At the beginning of the year the queen lays her eggs and sterile workers are born. They work in the nest taking care of the larvae and as they become older go out to forage for pollen and nectar. Of the British bumble bees only one is solitary this is the Forest Cuckoo Bumblebee. This bee lays eggs in the nest of the Early Bumble bee where they hatch and are cared for until they are fully grown and leave.

The British bumble bees live in colonies of up to 200 bees. Although there are many solitary bees which lay their eggs in holes in the ground and hollow stems of plants the hole in which a bumble bee colony is established is much more interesting to watch as minute by minute the bees come and go as they collect pollen and nectar. A colony of Buff-tailed bumble bees (*Bombus Terrestris*) established in a hole in the ground near to a loganberry bush provided quite an interesting study.

Only a small amount of pollen and nectar are stored in the bumble bees nest so they, unlike the honey bees have to go out to find food even when the weather is not good. This is quite important because in foraging for food in bad weather they pollinate the blossom which might otherwise not form fruit.

One great advantage that the bumble bee has as a pollinator is its size and weight. Nowhere is this more important than in our row of runner beans. This buzzing bumbling insect is strong enough to force its way into flowers where it causes vibration which distributes pollen. Queen bumble bees are placed in glass houses in spring where they establish their nests and raise colonies of bees whose weight enables them to fertilise the valuable indoor crops.

There has been a terrible decline in the Honey bee population as disease has wiped out many hives of bees and so reduced the number of people who still keep bees. When I was a boy there were quite a few bee keepers in my village and bee hives were a common sight. We had honey and better still Honey comb. Not those lovely square wooden boxes which held a pound of honey comb and which graced wealthy tables from Victorian times. We had the capping which was cut off before the honey could be extracted. There was not a lot of honey mainly wax but to a small boy at a time when there were few sweets that was a tea time treat.

So pollination is not everything and with that memory in mind I shall join with the poet Rupert Brooke to ask. Stands the Church Clock at ten to three?

And is there Honey still for tea? **Maurice Brawn.**