

Pollinator Patch with Juliet from Hive Helpers 'April is the cruellest month'

T. S. Eliot's rather gloomy assertion at the beginning of *The Waste Land* refers to something much deeper than the weather, but I always think of it when April arrives. We can have glorious warm spring weather in April, but equally I can remember snow in April too, such is its unpredictability. This affects our pollinators – honey bees, for example, can only safely fly above 10°C, but bumblebees, with their hairier coats, can withstand much colder temperatures, and have even been seen foraging in the snow!

Cold weather can also affect the flowers on which pollinators rely – nectar release can be slowed and even cease altogether if the blossoms are killed by frost. Luckily, apples (*Malus*) are one of the hardiest and easiest fruit trees to grow, and produce masses of open, single, white or pink flowers which attract a wide range of pollinators. The widespread red mason bee, a solitary bee, is a frequent visitor and a valuable pollinator in orchards. Unlike honey bees, who collect pollen in 'baskets' on their legs to take back to the hive to feed their brood, the red mason bee collects pollen in a brush on her abdomen, and looks more yellow than red! She is a much more effective pollinator of apples than the honey bee because of this abundance of pollen. Red mason bees look for pre-existing holes to make their nests in, such as cavities in masonry or dry, hollow plant stems, and they need mud with which they seal each cell in which they have laid a single egg. Each cell is stocked with pollen and nectar to feed the larva when it hatches from the egg. Red mason bees also forage on a wide variety of other garden plants, including borage, cranesbills, and perennial wallflower, so keep an eye out for them.

Pollinator plant of the month - umbellifers

The native cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) is growing fast in my wild patch and will soon be a froth of white flowers. It is well-suited to a wild garden with tiny flowers on its umbel heads which are the perfect size for micro insect pollinators such as tiny beetles, flies and small bees. I even saw it growing in borders at Wisley last year! It does self-seed all over the place, but it's easy to pull up the young plants as they emerge. If you prefer a better-behaved umbel, try the Ammi family (*Ammi majus* or *Ammi visnaga*) or the white laceflower (*Orlaya grandiflora*) which helpfully self-seeds in a restrained manner. Other umbels such as the elderflower with bigger heads are sometimes used by basking bees.



Ammi Visnaga



Elder

Other April plants for pollinators

April is the time to be seed sowing in earnest, with cosmos, calendula and phacelia all good for pollinators. I am sowing Korean mint (*Agastache*) which the bees absolutely love, but the plants I put in last year didn't survive even though they are perennials (but not a real mint) and the RHS notes they can be tender.