

Marc's List of Exotic Shrubs for the Wildlife-friendly Garden

Shouldn't we stick to 'Native' Plants?

British Gardeners are a diverse bunch and we look after a diverse range of gardens. Although the value of native shrubs such as hawthorn, blackthorn and goat willow as food plants for insects is well-established, that does not mean we can't grow other shrubs as well. But when we choose species from distant continents we have to be far more thoughtful if we want to choose those that will encourage wildlife (which in this case largely means providing pollen and nectar for insects such as butterflies). Many exotic plants have evolved a relationship with exotic pollinators such as Hummingbirds and Sun Birds, and our insects don't find them useful at all, as they can't gain access to nectar or pollen in their flowers.

I give below a short list of exotic ornamental shrubs that are sometimes recommended as source of pollen or nectar. Note that in some cases it is important you track down the particular cultivar (i.e. named variety) that I recommend.

This list is not exhaustive. I would be please to hear of other suggestions from readers. This is a new field and there is scope for much more study and research.

Buddleja X weyeriana cultivars

OK, we all know Buddlejas attract lots of butterflies, but *B. Davidii*, the common 'Buddleia', seeds around and is very invasive, particularly in areas of chalk grassland where conservation workers now have to clear back encroaching Buddleja scrub. Perhaps its too late to do anything about it, but if you live near chalk grassland and there are no Buddlejas nearby I wouldn't recommend planting *B. Davidii*. You can plant the orange-flowered *B. X weyeriana* hybrids with a clear conscience as they don't appear to produce viable seed, they also attract a broad spectrum of insects including both butterflies and bees, and they flower late into the season when nectar is scarce. Naming of cultivars in the nursery trade seems to be confused (so what's new?) The one I grow was bought as 'Sunset', but I have seen the same plant labelled as 'Sungold'. It has clear orange flowers with no hint of lilac. The beautiful *B. x fallowiana* 'Lochinch' with silver leaves is attractive to butterflies and is also said not to produce seeds.

The orange ball Buddleja (*B. globosa*) from South America seems to attract bees rather than butterflies. One year a neighbour's bush was covered in bumblebees, the next year it attracted hardly any. This species is one of the parents of *B. X weyeriana*, *B. Davidii* being the other.

Bupleurum fruticosum ('Shrubby Hare's Ear')

A shrubby evergreen umbellifer from Southern Europe, where it is often cultivated. It has leathery aromatic foliage and umbels of yellowish flowers, a bit like those of Fennel, that are very attractive to hoverflies and other small insects. Well worth growing for this reason. Difficult to obtain in the nursery trade, you may have to grow it from seed.

Ceanothus X 'Gloire de Versailles'

Ceanothus come from the Western United States. In my experience most Ceanothus have bunches of very small flowers that don't seem very attractive to insects. 'Gloire de Versailles' however is a hybrid with loose bunches of pale blue tubular flowers that is very attractive to butterflies and bees. I would be interested to hear reports of any other Ceanothus that are distinctly attractive to insects.

Caryopteris X clandonensis 'Kew Blue'

A deciduous shrub from China for a sunny position, has small tubular blue flowers attractive to insects.

Clethra alnifolia ('Sweet Pepper Bush')

A deciduous shrub from the Eastern United States that likes damp, acid or woodland soil. Has spikes of small scented white flowers attractive to moths and butterflies.

Hebe X 'Great Orme' and H. X 'Midsummer Beauty'

Hebes are close relatives of the herbaceous genus Veronica, and come from New Zealand. A very mixed bunch, nomenclature is a muddle and they are hard to identify. Some are much more attractive to insects than others. 'Great Orme' is a medium-sized hybrid with pale pink flowers that are attractive to butterflies. It is a distinctive cultivar and available true to name in the nursery trade.

'Midsummer Beauty' seems to be more of a generic name for a series of large shrubs with blue or grey-blue flowers in long spikes, attractive to both bees and butterflies. There are a number of other blue and white flowered Hebes that seem very popular with bumblebees, but I have no idea what their names are. Your best bet if you see a Hebe that is covered in bumblebees or butterflies is to beg a cutting from the owner.

Myrtus communis ('European Myrtle')

An attractive evergreen shrub from the South of France and Spain with small evergreen aromatic leaves. It has been grown in our gardens for centuries, but is susceptible to hard frost and prefers a site against a warm sunny wall. Fluffy white flowers in early summer are bumblebees' heaven. Purplish berries follow later which are stripped by blackbirds in January.

Amelanchier species ('Shad Bush')

Shrubs with white cherry-like blossoms early in the year, followed by blackish berries in late summer. Valuable for the berries as a source of food for berry-eating birds when most other berries are not yet ripe.

Erica terminalis ('Corsican Heath')

A shrubby heather-like plant popular with bumblebees. The Cornish Heath, Erica vagans, from the Atlantic fringes of Europe is also a good bee plant. Erica manipuliflora, from Southern Europe, and its hybrid Erica X griffithii have fragrant flowers that attract butterflies.

Eupatorium ligustrinum

A late-flowering evergreen bush that looks very like a privet, but has bunches of white fluffy flowers in September and October. These flowers seem very attractive to range of insects, especially hoverflies.

Ribes sanguineum (Flowering Currant)

To be honest, during most of my gardening life I did not warm to this shrub with its strange smell redolent of tom cats, and so often planted in a garish combination with Forsythia. But it is a very good early flower for bumblebees, as indeed are the flowers of the closely related blackcurrants and gooseberries. Forsythia by the way is not a wildlife-friendly shrub and seems unattractive to bees.

For a range of books giving comprehensive lists of bee plants, and butterfly nectar plants and larval food plants, please see my bibliography, downloadable from my website.

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