

Growing Wildlife -friendly Annual Flowers

Bedding Plants

Gardeners encounter 'bedding plants' as strips of colourful annuals sold every spring in garden centres, markets and DIY stores. Such plants are very popular, convenient, and quick to fill your flower borders if you are short of time. Almost all are annuals. The exceptions are Sweet Williams, which are biennials, and Dahlias, which are perennials with tubers that need to be lifted and protected from frost in winter, although when grown from seed they are often treated as annuals.

Unfortunately buying these strips of annuals is not a sustainable way of gardening. They are raised in big industrialised glasshouses, wasting energy and generating carbon emissions at every stage – they are raised in heated glasshouse, and shipped from Holland and elsewhere in gas-guzzling lorries, grown in non-recyclable plastic modules, in peat-based composts, using pesticides. A disaster for the environment in every way.

Apart from all this, most of the plants raised and sold in this way are not of any use to insects as they have 'double' flowers or are highly hybridized varieties, and don't supply much in the way of pollen or nectar. ('Double' in this sense means that pollen and nectar producing flower parts have been replaced by extra rows of petals).

The alternative is to grow your own annuals from seed. This allows you to select specific varieties that are single-flowered and will provide nectar or pollen for the insects that visit your garden. You can purchase them from on-line seed catalogues if you can't find the sorts that I recommend in your local shops.

Many of those listed overleaf can be sown directly where they are to grow. You can raise the others in a greenhouse, cold frame or conservatory, or on a windowsill. Most are very easy to grow. For seed sowing I recommend a peat-free medium such as Arthur Bowers 'New Horizon' mixed with sharp sand to make it suitable for seeds.

'Cornfield Annuals' Sown Directly

Many kinds of annuals do not like to be transplanted and do not need to be grown in seed trays or under glass, in fact they succeed best if their seed is scattered on prepared ground where they are to flower. If they are mixed and sowed over a large area they can create the flowery 'annual meadow' effect that I discuss on my meadows web page. In the list that follows, species that are particularly suitable for this treatment are marked with an asterisk.

If you are doing this, make sure the ground is well prepared, and raked to a tilth. Do not do so too early in the year and do not bury the seeds deeply. Just stir the soil so the seeds are barely covered.

List of Annual Flowers that will provide pollen and nectar.

Bear in mind that single-flowered forms are essential.
Kinds marked with an asterisk can be sown directly.

French Marigold, *Tagetes patula* single flowered forms only: 'Granada' or 'Naughty Marietta'.

Tobacco plant, *Nicotiana glauca*; (not *N. sylvestris*); attracts moths.

***Calendula**, single flowered forms. Can be sown direct. Very easy to grow.

***Candytuft**, *Iberis amara* Best sown direct. Very easy to grow.

Sweet William, *Dianthus barbatus*. (Biennial; sow in June, will flower the following year).

***Alyssum**, *Lobularia maritima*, esp. white forms. Can be sown direct. Very easy.

***Nasturtium**, *Tropaeolum majus*, but only single flowered strains such as 'Empress of India' and 'Golden Gleam'. Best of all is to get seeds from a friend's garden from individual plants that are being visited by bumblebees. Can be sown direct. Very easy.

Annual Scabious *Scabiosa atropurpurea* – excellent for bees and butterflies, but only the single-flowered strains

Bee Sage, *Agastache foeniculum* 'Honey Bee Blue'. actually an aromatic perennial herb, can be grown as an annual bedding plant from seed sown under glass in February. Insects love it.

Zinnias – choose varieties with single or semi-double flowers. Raise under glass.

Dahlias – grow single-flowered strains from seed, such as 'Coltress'. Raise under glass. Select individual plants that prove popular with bees or butterflies, and save the roots for following years.

***Wax Flower** *Cerinth* Likes a sunny spot and well-drained soil. Will seed itself around. First named 'wax flower' by the Romans. So many bees visited it they thought that the bees obtained wax from it. This plant is excellent for bumblebees and very easy to grow. Give it a sunny spot and a starved soil.

The following are suitable for a flowering 'cornfield mixture' :

***Blue Cornflower**, *Centaurea cyanus*, single-flowered form only. You may need to get the seed from a specialist wildflower seed supplier (several on the internet) as seed of double-flowered forms only is normally sold in garden centres. Sow direct where it is to flower. Very easy to grow and beautiful if massed.

***Flanders Poppy**, *Papaver Rhoeas*. Must sow direct. Pastel coloured strains such as 'Shirley Poppies' are fine so long as they are single-flowered.

***Larkspur**, *Consolida regalis*. Hard to buy seeds of forms that have not been altered by breeders, best to collect seeds from specimens being visited by bees in a friend's garden. Can also be raised as a biennial from an autumn sowing if pot-grown, overwintered in a cold frame and planted out the next spring. This give you bigger plants for a mixed border. Remember to save your own seed from individual plants that the bumblebees visit the most.

***Fiddleneck** *Phacelia campanularia* Grown as a vigorous 'green manure' crop by organic gardeners, it is also highly attractive to bees. Sow direct where it is to flower.

***Mexican Hat** *Ratibida*. Easy to grow, late summer daisy in mahogany/yellow. Sow direct.

***Annual Coreopsis** - *Coreopsis tinctoria*, a prairie daisy in mahogany/yellow. Can be sown direct.