

Herbs for Pollinating Insects

Why insects like flowering herbs

Most of the culinary and aromatic herbs that we grow come from the Mediterranean region of southern Europe, which has an insect fauna that is similar to ours. In fact many of the insects species found in the UK and Ireland also live in southern Europe. That is why our insects tend to find the flowers of these herbs very suitable as a source of pollen and nectar.

Lots of herbs belong to the Lamiaceae family (small, lipped flowers such as thymes and mints that are favourites of bumblebees), or the Apiaceae family (Umbellifers such as parsley and fennel that are popular with small solitary bees hoverflies).

You should leave some dead flowering stems and flower heads in your garden over winter and cut them back in the spring, as they provide winter hibernation sites for insects. Dry cut stems can be laid in an open compost heap or pile where they will perform the same service.

Some recommended herbs

The list below is by no means exhaustive

Thymes (*Thymus* spp.) - all kinds popular with bees

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) – all kinds popular with bees. Both upright and trailing forms are available. Some varieties flower early in the spring. It is worth planting these to provide early forage.

Culinary Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) – Again the common culinary sort with plain leaves seems to be the freest flowering and is very popular with long-tongued bumblebees. The similar ‘Greek Sage’ is earlier flowering, makes a beautiful small shrub in a sunny site, and is just as popular with bumblebees. Many other blue-flowered *Salvias* are good bee plants, but not the red flowered ones.

Hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*) – Another good forage flower for a range of insects.

Agastache – there are lots of *Agastache* species around these days. Many of the blue and purple flowered types, especially *A. foeniculum* and *A. rugosa*, are excellent and will attract a wide range of insects, including butterflies and moths. The scarlet and orange-flowered ones less so, as they evolved to be pollinated by humminbirds rather than insects.

Lavenders – some are excellent bee plants, mainly the old- fashioned types, and some are also very attractive to butterflies. The taller types such as *Lavandula angustifolia* and *L. x intermedia* cultivars are recommended if you are looking for varieties attractive to Insects. They make large bushes and need to be given enough space. The varieties ‘Grosso’ (blue) and ‘Edelweiss’ (white) have been shown in recent research to be the most productive in terms of nectar. The commonly grown small ‘Hidcote’ strain is not reliable as a forage source for insects and I do not recommend it. Modern hybrids of the so-called French Lavender *L. stoechas*, are also often not very accessible to insects because the flowers have been modified by hybridisation.

Fennel – *Foeniculum vulgare*

A perennial umbellifer, bearing flat heads of small yellowish flowers – especially good for small solitary bees and hoverflies. The bronze-leaved form is just as good.

Angelica – *Angelica archangelica*

Another Umbellifer, a tall biennial – the greenish flowers are very attractive to a wide range of insects. The related species *Angelica sylvestris*, is also highly recommended. It is not a culinary herb and will grow in damper soil than *A. archangelica*. It is also a biennial.

A number of other herbs and vegetables are in the Umbellifer family – parsley, celery, caraway, dill, carrots, parsnip etc. It is worth letting all of these produce a few flowers as they are such good forage for smaller insects.

Chives - *Allium schoenoprasum* – a bee plant

Garlic Chives or Chinese Chives - *Allium tuberosum* - also attracts butterflies.

Many other species of *Allium* (ornamental onions and garlics) are attractive to insects, especially the Round-headed Leek or Bristol Onion, *Allium sphaerocephalon*..

Tansy – *Tanacetum vulgare*

An ornamental herb with bunches of yellow button flowers attractive to a range of smaller bees.

Curry Plant – *Helichrysum italicum* (Syn. *H. angustifolium*)

Another ornamental herb with fragrant leaves and bunches of tiny yellow flowers attractive to a range of smaller bees.

Mints - *Mentha* species

Many kinds of mint, when in flower, attract insects. The hybrid known as 'Buddleia' is particularly recommended as insect forage.

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Marc Carlton

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