



# The birds and the bees



Allow some of your kale to flower if you don't need the space right away. It provides great early forage for bees. **Photograph:** Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar

**Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar** continues her series on gardening for wildlife. In this instalment she advises on catering for the vitally important pollinator insects inhabiting your garden.

NUTAN PHOTOGRAPHY



**In this and subsequent issues I'm going to give you advice to help you create a beautiful ornamental garden that will provide food and shelter for birds and other wild creatures, with only some nettles and brambles! By making some simple changes or plant choices you**

**can easily, and in any space, grow food and habitat for wildlife.**

## National Pollinator Plan

Ireland now has a National Pollinator Plan, instigated and launched by the National Biodiversity Data Centre with the support of a wealth of people and organisations, including BirdWatch Ireland. It has been put in place to raise awareness of the plight of our pollinators and to support measures that will halt their decline.

'Pollinator' refers to the range of insects that pollinate all the flowers out there, from our native trees to fruit trees, crops of

strawberries, wild flowers, etc, etc. They come in the form of honey bees, bumblebees and solitary bees, but also hoverflies, butterflies and moths.

There are actions within the plan for farmers and for agencies that manage public lands, such as the OPW, Bord na Móna and Iarnród Éireann, and for groups such as BirdWatch Ireland and the RSPB and for private gardeners and even community gardens.

So, if you are involved in the running of a community garden or are in the process of setting one up, or have your own private garden, there's something you can do to help our pollinators survive and perhaps thrive.

## Community gardens

Community gardens and gardening groups are an excellent way to get the word out there. You could have a haven for wildlife in your back garden, and that's wonderful, but no one might ever know, whereas public spaces and community gardens spread the message and get the community involved. So, if you are part of a community garden, you should try and get the group to take on the pollinator plan and implement some of their actions.

So what can you do in your garden or community garden to help pollinators? The

pollinator plan asks gardeners to do five things:

**1. Reduce the frequency of grass mowing to once or twice a year.** This allows wild plants to flower; by which we mean daisies and dandelions as well as the fancier stuff like orchids. Dandelions are the first to flower; with the main flush coming out from March on – though with flowers open almost all year they are a very important food source for pollinators emerging from hibernation. Goldfinches and House Sparrows also eat their seed.

So, choose an area of grass you can 'let go' and cut some of it once a year in early September; and some of it twice – once in late spring and again in September – to encourage different species to flower:

**2. Plant up pollinator-friendly trees and shrubs** like willow (but not as a sculpture or arch, as the annual pruning prevents it from ever flowering), hazel and hawthorn. Mahonia, buddleia and viburnums have later flowers of good use too.

Remember that lots of what you grow in an allotment or community garden makes excellent pollinator fodder – fruit trees, fruit bushes, broad and runner beans, peas, tomatoes, courgettes and pumpkins, and even bolting beetroots and onions.

3. Reduce or preferably eliminate altogether the use of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides.

4. Keep hedgerows maintained, and plant new ones. Brambles and ivy are particularly important to pollinators, so think twice before removing any of them.

5. Create pollinator nesting habitats. The commercial solitary bee boxes actually are only useful to a small number of pollinator species. So to help all the others, it comes back to long grass again – for ground-nesting bumblebees – but also bare earth, such as on embankments, preferably east-facing for mining solitary bees, and south-facing stone walls or masonry for cavity-nesting bees.

## How will this help birds?

Well, without pollinators there would be no pollination of flowers, and therefore no seeds or berries – no holly berries, no haws or sloes, no blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries or currants, no sunflower seeds, no teasel seeds, and so on, for the birds to eat. And if that wasn't enough motivation for you, pollinators and their young get eaten by birds too – have you ever seen swallows hunting bees? Or a blackbird eating a caterpillar? Of course you have!

So, if you have your eye on a patch of mown grass in a park or school grounds for a community garden, just think how much habitat you can create by turning it into allotments or community gardens. You won't be just providing a space for the community

to get together; a place where socially isolated people can meet up, and helping people get back in touch with nature and learn about seasonality and healthy eating; you'll be helping the birds and the bees too! So do remember all that when you're asking for the land or for grant funding to get you up and running.

## Further information

● Further information on the **National Pollinator Plan** is available from the **National Biodiversity Data Centre** in Waterford, [www.biodiversityireland.ie/pollinator-plan](http://www.biodiversityireland.ie/pollinator-plan).

● For info on setting up or running a **community garden**, or just to link in with

other community gardens, check out the **Community Garden Network** at [www.cgn.ie](http://www.cgn.ie). Under 'Resources,' you will find a lot of links to useful advice.

● If you would like more hands-on help or advice, contact me, **Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar**, on [lynnsirishgardens@gmail.com](mailto:lynnsirishgardens@gmail.com). I am an outreach horticulturist based in Galway and I am involved in school gardening, community gardening, VEC courses and adult education. For more information, visit [www.kinvarasustainableliving.com](http://www.kinvarasustainableliving.com).

● See the *Garden Bird Year* blog by BirdWatch Ireland's Oran O'Sullivan at <http://gardenbirdyear.blogspot.ie/>.

JOHN SEVERNS

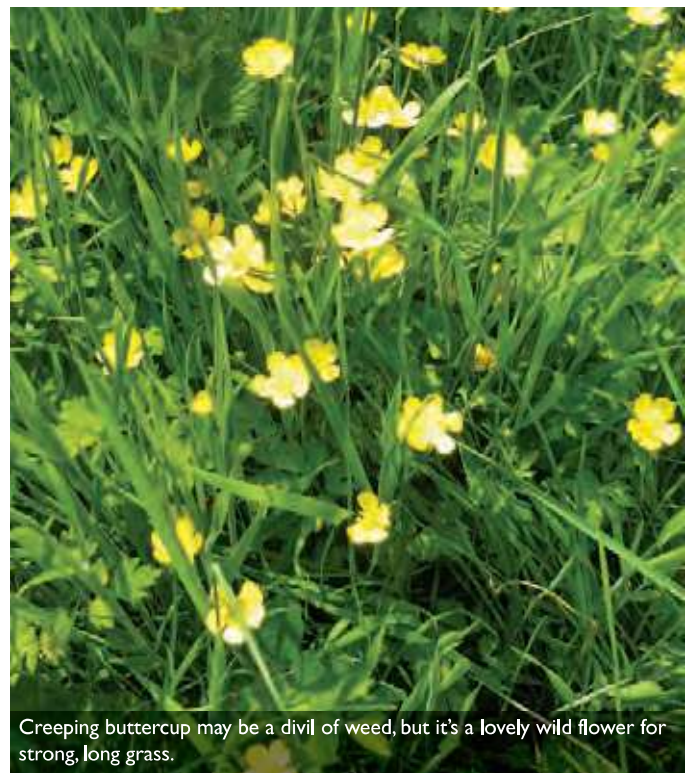


Honey bee extracts nectar from aster.

ORAN O'SULLIVAN



Pollinator in action: Speckled Wood feeding on bramble nectar.



Creeping buttercup may be a devil of weed, but it's a lovely wild flower for strong, long grass.

LYNN O'KEEFFE-LASCAR