PLANTS FOR POLLINATORS

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WHY?

In the UK we have a wide range of pollinators. Bees are the most well known, but flies, hoverflies, bugs, bats, butterflies, moths, beetles, wasps and small mammals also pollinate crops producing food for us as well as other plants. Historically crops were predominantly pollinated by honey bees, but the type of pollinators is changing significantly as honey bee populations decline. It's not just top fruit, such as apples and pears, or soft fruit, such as strawberries and raspberries, which need insect pollination, vegetables such as runner beans and field-scale crops such as oilseed rape also benefit.

There has been a lot written in recent years about the huge loss in pollinators. The journal Nature published a report in 2018 ranking the most nature-depleted countries on the planet in which the UK ranked poorly, as 189th out of the 218 most depleted. A wide range of organisations have been motivated to try and reverse this trend, including many governments who are creating pollinator strategies. Your local council should have a pollinator action plan but if not, you could ask them to create one: https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/ask-your-council-introduce-pollinator-action-plan

HOW?

As church communities and individual gardeners, we can play a significant part in reversing this trend. Churchyards and gardens are not just places for us to rest and enjoy the colour, texture or scent of flowering plants and trees, they are also food stores for wildlife, including pollinators. Each type of pollinator prefers a different flower shape, to make landing and access to pollen and nectar easy.

Bees favour sturdy flowers with short flower tubes to match the length of their short tongues. They like brightly coloured white, yellow or blue flowers, whilst red are harder for them to see. They love the nectar, which is a major sugar burst for them, and collect the protein-rich pollen on their legs in 'pollen baskets'. Plants attractive to bees often have tramlines or a landing strip to guide the bees in, the dots on a foxglove act in this way: https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/gardeningadvice/

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Moths are usually night flying so prefer flowers which are white or pale green and star shaped so they are easy to locate in low light. They also favour flowers such as night scented stock which are strongly scented: https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/garden-health/wildlife/Moths-encouraging-into-your-garden

Butterflies like tightly packed, flat-topped flowers, which are easy to land on. They feed on the pollen and nectar as they walk across the flower heads. Some butterflies have very long tongues so can reach deep into a flower to reach the nectar. Like bees they like bright colours including reds, pinks, and purples such as Buddleia, Zinnia and Phlox. They can see a wider spectrum of colour than bees or humans: https://www.gardenersworld.com/plants/10-plants-for-butterflies/

Hoverflies are day flying and have short tongues, so prefer open, shallow flowers for easy landing. They are not fussy about colour and like dull or light-coloured flowers such as cow parsley or ivy: https://www.gardenersworld.com/plants/the-best-flowers-for-hoverflies/

Some animals pollinate plants too, collecting pollen as they brush past flowers and carry it to a new plant.

To maximise the number of pollinators, try to ensure there is always a food source available by offering a wide range of plants, so that there is something in flower throughout the year. Wildflower meadows which many churchyards can offer are a particularly valuable resource.

There is a wide selection of information available on the web to help you choose what to plant. Gardeners' World gives some helpfully short lists as a starting point: https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/grow-plants/plants-for-pollinators-in-summer-and-autumn/

Pam Martin, from one of our Gold Eco Churches in Cumbria, has put together a list which shows how she keeps her offering food sources going through the whole year – whether pollen, fruit or nuts. See the separate document: 'Useful plants for wildlife'.

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Professor Dave Goulson from the University of Sussex has his preferred list for bees here: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/lifesci/goulsonlab/resources/flowers

Keener gardeners may want to refer to the RHS extensive list of plants for pollinators: https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/plants-for-pollinators

LONGER READS & OTHER RESOURCES

Pollinators are so important that many National Governments have written strategy papers to prevent their decline. Many charities offer resources about how to encourage them and learn about them. Here are a few:

- The Wildlife Trusts are a grassroots movement helping people make nature part of local life. They have very good resources including this one on plants for pollinators: https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/plant-flowers-bees-and-pollinators
- Buglife: https://www.buglife.org.uk/our-work/pollinator-projects/
- GrowWild is a national learning outreach project from Kew Gardens, with lots of projects for all ages. Here they tell us about unusual pollinators: https://www.growwilduk.com/blog/amazing-uk-pollinators-you-might-not-have-thought

BOOKS

The Wildlife Gardener by Kate Bradbury, Kyle Books, 2013, has some excellent guidance on planting for pollinators.