

## Beneficial bees

Bees can be seen as unwelcome pests but we should remember the important role that they play in our ecosystem and the benefits they provide to farmers and gardeners. Furthermore, when compared to wasps, bees are generally less aggressive and reluctant to sting unless they are provoked.

There are three different types of bees that commonly visit domestic gardens. The most easily recognised are the fluffy bumble bees which are easily spotted due to their large size, bright stripey bodies and awkward bumbling flight. Then we have the more dull coloured honeybees, famous for making honey; and finally a number of small inconspicuous solitary bees which, unlike the social honey and the bumble bees, live alone.

So why have bees earned the prestigious "Beneficial Insects" name tag?

Probably their most important role, both economically and ecologically, is as pollinators. Through their actions in collecting nectar and pollen, a wide variety of commercial plants such as oil-seed rape and beans and also wild flowers are pollinated.

With approximately one third of the food we eat relying on bees for pollination, their commercial value in the Canada alone has been estimated at 1,2 billions annually (worldwide: 250 billions!). Although many other insects, such as wasps, butterflies and beetles, also pollinate flowers, bees are by far the most important as they actively collect pollen. They even have specially designed pollen baskets in their hind legs to carry it.

In addition to delicious honey, the honey bee provides us with propolis which is an antiseptic resinous substance collected from trees. The bees use propolis to sterilise their nests and it is becoming increasingly used in complementary medicine.

Despite their importance, many bee species are declining and roughly a quarter of our native species are now endangered. This is primarily as a consequence of herbicides killing wild flowers and the destruction of suitable nesting habitats. In addition honey bees are under continued threat from the Varroa mite, a tiny blood sucking mite that has ravaged through both commercial bee hives and wild honey bee colonies.

Bees should always be seen as welcome visitors to your garden and should be encouraged by planting nectar rich plants such as red clover, foxglove and knapweed. Providing suitable nesting sites may also help.

