

Why I would miss the humble bumble bee

Jennifer Brown

It's no secret that the world's bees are in trouble. Honey bees, bumble bees and other species are in decline. From a practical, human point-of-view, this is of serious concern. As many as one-third of our food crops are pollinated by bees.¹ Even if this were not the case, however, if the world were to lose them, I would deeply miss the humble bumble bee.

Bumble bees are generally gentle and docile. They are likely to sting only if they feel threatened or if their nest is at risk of harm. It is even possible to pick up and hold a bumble bee without the bee becoming obviously distressed. Of course, anyone who is allergic to bee or wasp stings should still take care to avoid any chance of being stung and not handle any bees. If you've ever held a bumble bee, you'll know that they are wonderfully soft, and their feet tickle as they walk across your hand.

Queen bumble bees hibernate over the winter and when they emerge in the spring they can be weak and very hungry. If in early spring you spot a bumble bee stumbling around your garden looking disoriented and maybe even a bit drunk, she's probably been searching unsuccessfully for that first post-hibernation meal of flower nectar. Feeding the bee a little honey or sugar water will give her a quick pick-me-up so that she can buzz off to find a proper meal. Watching a bumble bee eat is an amazing thing. They have incredibly long tongues which they use to get nectar from flowers. I have had the wonderful experience of letting a bumble bee drink sugar water from the palm of my hand and was fascinated to watch its precise and delicate feeding with that amazing tongue.

For me, summer just wouldn't be the same without the sight and sound of bumble bees going about their business. And yet, there is a risk that bumble bees may be lost to us forever. At least one species of bumble bee has already been listed as endangered in the United States, and scientific evidence is mounting that some agricultural pesticides are harming a range

¹ Simon Klein and Andrew Barron. 'Ten years after the crisis, what is happening to the world's bees?' *The Conversation*. May 7, 2017.

of bee species, including bumble bees. It's up to us to help our bumble bees to survive and thrive. How can we do this? We can start by being kind to them. Don't swat them if they fly near you or get into your house. If you're outdoors, just let them go about their important business of gathering food. If they have found their way indoors, either gently trap them in a jar or glass and immediately release them outside or, using a bit of paper, gently direct them towards an open door or window. If you have a garden, you can make it bee-friendly. It is possible to make (or, if you're like me and your DIY skills are a bit lacking, to buy) bumble bee houses that provide safe, warm spaces for bees to nest or hibernate. Many garden centres sell plants and seeds that have helpfully labelled as bee/pollinator friendly. If you're thinking about adding some new plants to your garden, choose bee-friendly ones. And avoid using pesticide sprays! As well as getting rid of garden pests, there's the risk that they might have a harmful effect on your garden bees.

If you don't have a garden but do have an outdoor space big enough for a flower pot, why not plant up some bee-friendly flowers? As well as providing a much-needed food source, the soil in the pot can become a nesting or hibernation spot, too. And, of course, they'll also bring some colour to brighten up your habitat, too.

It's especially important for bumble bees to have a food source when they emerge from hibernation, so early-spring flowering plants are especially helpful. Alternatively, putting out a small saucer of sugar water or honey mixed with water when you see the first bees flying can also help – but be warned, ants, as well as bees, will be attracted to this.

Bees are beautiful, complex creatures, vital for a healthy environment and our own wellbeing. Bumble bees are especially charming, and I would hate for us to be without them.