

A Garden for Butterflies and Bumblebees

As part of a wider initiative to attract more wildlife into the Craven College campus, a new butterfly and bumblebee garden has been planted near the greenhouse at Aireblock.

There are approximately 50 species of resident British butterflies and 15 of these are common garden visitors (by contrast there are about 2,500 British moths). In recent years however, many species of butterflies have declined, according to a recent report highlighted by Sir David Attenborough “*More than three quarters of British butterfly species have declined in the last 20 years, some of them very rapidly. That is worrying, not least because these declines indicate an underlying deterioration of the environment as a whole. For the sake of future generations, we must take action now.*” Many of Britain’s 22-28 species of bumble bees are also becoming scarcer, these most vital of pollinators have served agriculture for millennia and yet are now seeing that very same industry participate in their decline. Gardens, no matter how small, can act as vital habitats for our native insects; a range of nectar plants, native ‘weeds’, rotting wood and a pond should entice a whole range of aerial acrobats to your garden.

The Craven College butterfly and bumblebee garden has been planted predominately with nectar plants, many of which are familiar garden flowers. The site is deliberately sunny but sheltered and has a range of nectar plants flowering throughout the summer and autumn. A few spring flowers are also included, since these are vital for butterflies coming out of hibernation.

Amongst the plants included so far are *Buddleia davidii*, *Sedum spectabile*, chives, comfrey, *Allium aflatanense*, honeysuckle, *Cotoneaster horizontalis*, globe thistle, *Verbena bonariense*, Michaelmas daisies, hebes, lavender and a wide range of hardy annuals. Among the annuals is the very pretty *Phacelia tanacetifolia*, often used as a green manure but also much loved by bees. The moths are not forgotten either and so tobacco plants and night-scented flowers like jasmine and honeysuckle are also included. The Centre for Horticulture at the Auction Mart also has a range of nectar plants including a number of low-growing *Aubretia* planted on raised alpine beds. No garden is too small to attract butterflies.



Phacelia tanacetifolia

Whilst adult butterflies will feed from a wide range of colourful, exotic garden plants, their caterpillars tend to require certain native species as their food plants. Holly and ivy are used by the holly blue, stinging nettles are favoured by comma, red admiral, small tortoiseshell, peacocks and many moths. Thistles are the food plant of painted ladies and cuckoo flower for orange tips and green-veined white. Caterpillars of speckled wood, meadow brown, small heath and ringlet all eat common native grasses where they are left to grow tall. A butterfly garden therefore also needs to include a wide range of native wildflowers (weeds) and, for this reason, a differential mowing strategy has been adopted in parts of the campus.



Alliums and comfrey

Mown paths allow access but either side is left to grow tall until cutting back in the autumn. Comfrey, which bees adore, has established well below the Art block and the inclusion of tulips, camassias and alliums should make the area more colourful (and nectar rich) throughout the spring. Elsewhere, nettles are encouraged, not in small patches hidden away in a dingy corner, but larger colonies in full sun where butterflies are more likely to lay their eggs. Patches of nasturtiums have been planted for the large and small whites, hopefully keeping them off the cabbages in the vegetable plot.

Later this year, we have plans to sow locally sourced seed of red valerian, cowslips, primroses, sweet rocket, honesty, oxeye daisies and the parasitic yellow rattle for planting on the campus. These species are not only good for wildlife but they are attractive too. Hops have been planted in the native hedgerow at the Auction Mart for the larvae of commas, red admirals and small tortoiseshells and will be planted elsewhere next year. Planting of fruit trees, to which bees are so vital, will also be extended around the campus.

As a final effort, stacks of logs and branches have been left in strategic areas since some butterflies overwinter as adults and they do this in dense vegetation, ivy or dry places like log piles and garden sheds. Butterflies and moths can be helped in the winter by not tidying up too much so that the adults and pupae are not disturbed. Rotting logs are also essential for many other less glamorous insects and other creepy crawlies.

This year could be a good year for butterflies, particularly the migratory painted lady which has been reported heading to the British Isles in large numbers. Bumble bees already seem to be more numerous than last year and so keep an eye open for these wonderful creatures this summer, they really do add an extra dimension to the garden.

Want to know more? -

www.ukbutterflies.co.uk

www.ukmoths.org.uk

www.bumblebeeconservation.org.uk

www.butterfly-conservation.org

Michael D. Myers

(Horticulture Co-ordinator, Craven College)