

Confined to the Garden: Week 4

With the warm weather over the Easter weekend, there was a buzz of activity around the bee hotels. Male Red Mason Bees have emerged and are hanging around waiting for females to follow. When eggs were laid inside the tubes last year, the ones at the back were already destined to be females and the males were deposited closer to the opening. Each egg was sealed in with its own supply of pollen and developed into a larva and then an adult bee. Now it is time for this new generation to chew their way out and start the cycle all over again, providing pollination services along the way. I expect to see leafcutter bees using the hotels as well, but not for another couple of months yet.



Checking out of the bee hotel.

What happens inside a bee hotel? http://www.redbeehive.com/?page_id=190

This year's goal for the garden is to provide more pollen and nectar for bees, butterflies and other pollinators. At the moment, there are only flowers available at certain times of the year. Ideally, I'd like to fill the gaps so that there is always something flowering, even in the winter. This will require buying in some new plants. Even if I had the budget for new plants, garden centres are closed at the moment as non-essential shops. Maybe next payday I will be able to order some from an online supplier, as I'm saving a bit of money on petrol this month! For now, I've had another rummage and come up with some packets of seed I've had lying around for a while, including wildflower mixes.

These will have to do for now. I can at least make a start on my grand pollinator plan by increasing the amount and variety of flowers in the garden. I also have some pots not currently being put to good use, so I'm doing away with the accumulated 'weeds' they are harbouring and re-using them. Any size of container can be turned into a mini-meadow and these should do nicely.



Click here to learn about the importance of meadow habitats:

<http://www.magnificentmeadows.org.uk/conservate-restore/importance-of-meadows>

Why wildflowers matter everywhere, not just in big meadows:

<https://www.growwilduk.com/why-wildflowers-matter>

After removing the Goose Grass, Bindweed, slugs etc. I broke up the clumps and put all the good stuff back in the pots, plus a bit of multi-purpose compost to top them up.





Then I spread mixed wildflower seed over the surface of the soil and watered generously.



All finished off with some improvised temporary cat guards. Freshly prepared soil is irresistible and if one of my cats doesn't dig it all up, someone else's will! With a bit of luck, I should have two mini-meadows for pollinators to visit this summer.



I say “with a bit of luck” because, as I have said before, I am not the world’s greatest gardener. The presence of pots with nothing growing in them but opportunistic ‘weeds’ should have given you a clue there! Whatever was supposed to be growing in them died long ago and has been replaced by whatever could survive without any help from me. Considering that all these seeds are all well past their ‘use-by’ date, it will be a small miracle if anything grows at all!

In spite of this, I’ve put some Buddleia seed in trays to see if it will germinate. The packet is stamped with a use by date of September 2018. It also says this should be done indoors but I don’t have any space to do it indoors, so they’ll have to take their chances outside. The packet also says it should be done in February or March, so I’m a bit late. Maybe the warmth of the April sun will convince them they are in a nice cosy propagator and set them going. I may not be the world’s greatest gardener, but I have great faith in nature finding a way to thrive wherever a chance is given.



If the Buddleia seed does germinate, once the seedlings are big enough, I will transplant them into another large container. I don’t want this getting really big and taking over the whole garden or escaping. Although Buddleia is very attractive to adult butterflies, it can be very invasive, and I’ve spent weeks removing swathes of it from nature reserves where a native wildflower meadow would be far more beneficial to the local ecology.

Click here for a discussion of the pros and cons of Buddleia:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/why-you-shouldnt-plant-butterfly-bush-1968210>

The rest of the seeds are all native species and have been flung about the garden with scant regard for instructions on packets. If I’m lucky, nature will find a way. If not, at least I gave it a chance. They’re certainly not going to grow into flowers sitting in their packets, are they? I’ve chucked some Foxglove and Ox-Eye Daisy into parts of the borders and added some Clover to the lawn. Fingers crossed!

Click here for a list of bee-friendly plants and their flowering times to help plan year-round flowers:

<https://www.urbanbees.co.uk/plants/plants.htm>

Click here for advice on gardening for bees:

<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/bees/gardening-bees>

So what else has been happening in my garden this week?

The bird feeders have been busy. There's always lots of House Sparrows and Starlings. Blue Tits are less frequent but there has been a pair hanging around this week. Also, a trio of squabbling Robins have been taking advantage of the leftovers under the fat ball holder. They enjoyed the mealworms I put out as a treat at the weekend. There have been two pairs of Blackbirds hopping about in the evenings and bathing in the pond. They are always the last birds to go to roost. I think they missed most of the mealworms as the Robins got in there first.

Here are a couple of pictures I managed to snap while I was working on my mini meadows.



Robin



Blue Tit

I am seeing Buzzards over my garden much more often than usual. On warm days there is often a pair of them circling high above. Perhaps they are exploring further afield as human activity is reduced. There will certainly be less roadkill available for scavengers, but Buzzards also hunt small prey and eat a lot of Earthworms, so they should be able to adapt with ease.

I'm always happy to see predators. I see them as a sign of a healthy ecosystem. One predator I find particularly thrilling to watch in the garden is the Sparrowhawk. I haven't seen her lately, but I dug out this old photo of a female Sparrowhawk resting on the fence after a failed attempt to ambush some Starlings on the feeders.



And what about the Hedgehogs?

As some money has been saved on petrol this month, I treated myself to another camera. Like a lot of tech, they've become much more affordable in recent years. You can still spend a lot of money on a top of the range model, but they are now available from around £20-30.

If you're interested in using camera traps in your garden, click here for reviews of budget models:

<https://outdoorwilds.com/best-budget-trail-camera/>



Hogcam III

And what have I been capturing with all these cameras?

I've been working on getting the position of the new camera right to record entrances and exits through the 'Hedgehog highway' (a hole under the fence next to my back gate). I will probably move it soon to monitor any activity around the nesting boxes.



Click here for a short video clip from the new camera:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5epthZ3F8IY>

Courtship has begun in earnest. Male Hedgehogs will spend hours circling a female while she makes huffing sounds at him. I like to call this the courtship 'dance'. Sometimes they are interrupted by

rival males. Usually the rival is shoved unceremoniously out of the way, but if they are evenly matched a wrestling match can on almost as long as a courtship dance.

Click here for more information on Hedgehog courtship and breeding behaviour:

<https://www.hedgehogstreet.org/about-hedgehogs/hoglets/>

For *much* more information: <https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/european-hedgehog-breeding-biology-season-courtship>

A two-hour episode of exactly this kind of courtship behaviour was captured by my hogcams this week. One male began trying to woo a female but was usurped by another male who barged his way in and attempted to sweep her off her feet for himself.

Click the link below to see a speeded-up video of this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LhMOX8fnz4>

I really hope to see some hoglets in my garden at some point this summer, and it looks like they're working on it. Check back here next week to see what else has been happening in my garden...