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Towards the end of a very warm, Dutch summer, whilst on holiday out there, I was cycling past a field which struck me as quite extraordinary. Normal fields that I'm used to have rows and rows of crops, green on top of green on top of green. But from the corner of my eye I was hit by a cascade of colour: pinks, yellows and blues. It was so mesmerising that I found myself slowing down to see why about ten rows of would-be crops, all around the huge field, had been replaced by beautiful wild flowers.

Then I vaguely remembered something termed an "agri-environmental" scheme. These have been encouraged by the European Union since the late 1980s, at least on paper, but have gone largely ignored by farmers, unless they have financial incentives. However, there has been a desperate cry across EU countries of late by countless environmental campaigners, to stop something which would be irreversible and have dire consequences for people if not prevented: the extinction of the honeybee.

What's so important about the honeybee?

You know the food that you've already eaten, or are about to eat today? Bees made approximately two thirds of that possible. Through accidental pollination when they collect the plant's nectar, bees produce the next generation of fruits, vegetables, crops for animal feed and much, much more. Without honeybees, the sheer diversity of foodstuffs would be severely diminished. The honeybee has ironically been stigmatised because of their ability to sting people, yet they rarely do, and without them we'd be in dire straits.

Honeybee numbers have been plummeting for years now, and no one has paid too much attention to it. Since 2006, however, honeybee keepers have reported a 30% loss of their hives after winter, compared to an average number of 5% or 10%. This loss is unsustainable; the bee keepers have been trying to quell the problem through breeding programmes, however they fear that bees won't be able to cope with falling numbers for much longer.

What's being done?



The realisation that bees are running out of plants to feed on was a stark one, but the reason for this is quite surprising. It is not, in fact, as much about urban towns and cities, but more about what's happening out in the countryside. Intensive farming has always been a problem for nature. The pesticides, the culling, the paradoxical disregard for nature in order to mould it for financial benefits, to name a couple of examples. It isn't a coincidence that the eradication of wolves and sea eagles on mainland Britain was because of farmers targeting them.

Now, though in a much more indirect way, the honeybees have fallen victim of intensive farming too. Due to the lack of wildflowers, and the many crop types which bees cannot feed upon, the bees are struggling to get enough food right where they should be getting plenty: in the countryside. So some nature-conscious farmers have heroically taken it upon themselves to change the bee's plight.

The many rows of flowers that I saw were, I was delighted to see, being visited by loads of honeybees, greedily enjoying their new-found nectar. The whole area was buzzing with life. More schemes like these in what is now an intensively-farmed Europe, along with the recent EU-wide ban on neonicotinic pesticides which I shall write about in a later blog, will definitely bring bees back from the brink.



What you can do to help

It's not all up to the farmers to save the honeybee, though their role is crucial. If you have a garden, be it acres in size or a tiny balcony, you can do your bit too.

For those with bigger gardens, though they don't have to be huge, I'd recommend adding a bit of colour to

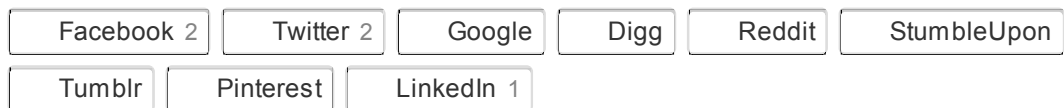
your lawn. Many opt either to have their lawn plain, with no colour except the obvious green. However, just try throwing a couple of British wildflower seeds on your lawn's perimeters, and you should be delighted with the rich colours, plus providing bees with their much-needed nectar, and allowing them to do their vital bit through accidental pollination.

Not only will planting British wildflowers attract many different varieties of honeybees, but they are also likely to attract the rarer species, as these don't feed on plants non-native to Britain. For instance, Scottish readers could attract the rare *Bombus Distingendus*, which is now only found on the Scottish isles and along the West and North Coast of Scotland. Or, if you live in South Wales, the Midlands or the South East, you could be lucky enough to attract the rare *Bombus Sylvarum* if you plant British wildflower seeds.

Another recommendation is to buy a Buddleja bush, commonly known as a butterfly bush. I promise you, in the height of summer, the diversity of butterflies, dragonflies and honeybees that this bush attracts is truly spectacular. Plant one in your garden and you'll reap the benefits within days. Other plants loved by honeybees are honeysuckle, aquilegia, foxgloves and Viper's bugloss.

If you don't have a garden, but a small balcony instead, I'd recommend that you buy plant pots and stuff them full of the plants and herbs that bees love, and that will also be easy for you to keep on your balcony. If you want to combine saving a bit of money by growing your own herbs with helping the bees, you should grow herbs such as fennel, sage, lavender, thyme, rosemary and mint. Moreover, the plants which bees feed on that would suit a pot life are geraniums, roses, poppies, marigolds, dahlias and clematis, to name a few.

Trying to add as many variations of the plants mentioned above to your gardens will really make a huge difference to the honeybee's fortunes. Plant a couple and watch your garden buzz into life.



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Author: [Sunniva](#) Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit is a writer specialising in financial, travel, environmental and political features. She has national newspaper experience with The Daily Telegraph and The Independent, and currently works as a freelancer for publications like Selfbuilder & Homemaker, and as a ghost writer for CNBC, Investopedia and Hubbis. Her blog explores the possibilities of leading an environmentally-friendly lifestyle whilst reaping the resultant health benefits. It also gives practical advice about how to achieve these goals, and unpicks the political developments that affect the environment as they happen. Sunniva aims to merge her interests in politics, economics and sustainable living with her interest in

writing top-quality content which combines editorial values with readers' enjoyment. Visit <http://www.sunnivadr.co.uk/> for more information.

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