

Bees are the batteries of orchards, gardens, guard them

(Carol Ann Duffy)

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Long ago, the tears of Ra, the Egyptian sun god, fell to earth and were transformed into bees who then provided Ra's followers with liquid gold – honey. We still enjoy honey today in all its delightful varieties. The different flavours whether acacia, clover or heather (to name but a few) depend on the type of flower the nectar is collected from. As the bees collect nectar, pollen gets stuck on their feet and because they fly from flower to flower, they cause pollination. One third of everything we eat depends on the presence of bees, whether we eat it like tomatoes or apples or whether it is the food farmers feed to their livestock. A lack of pollination therefore impacts, directly or indirectly, on the availability of meat, vegetables, fruits, nuts and, of course, flowers.

One aspect of bee behaviour that puzzled biologists is how they manage quite complicated tasks with their limited brainpower. They discovered that bees use something called a 'waggle dance' to communicate the directions and energy required to fly to food sources. The direction of the food source is indicated by the direction the dancer faces, energy expenditure (or distance) is indicated by the length of time it takes to make one circuit of the dance. Their communication skills don't end there. Honey bees use a rich repertoire of vibrational signals to send messages, including a 'get to work' signal, a request for grooming and even an expression of surprise.

These skills evolved because honey bees are social insects that live in colonies which have a single queen, hundreds of male drones and 20,000 to 80,000 female worker bees. Each colony also has developing eggs, larvae and pupae.

Honey bees swarm as a result of overcrowding within a hive. An old honey bee queen will leave the hive with about half of the worker bees, while a new queen remains in the old hive with the rest of the workers. Swarming honey bees will fly, and then cluster on shrubs and tree branches. The clusters rest there for several hours to a few days, depending on the amount of time needed to search for a new nesting site. When a scout honey bee locates a good location for the new colony, the cluster immediately flies to the new site.

A swarm of bees is not normally dangerous but it will attack if provoked because workers will protect their queen. Should a swarm of bees appear in your garden, it is best to contact a local beekeeper who will gather the swarm and relocate it.

Since 1990, the UK has lost 13 species of bees and a further 35 are considered under threat of extinction. Bees face many threats such as habitat loss, climate change, toxic pesticides and disease and there is evidence to show that these threats work in combination. There are an estimated 24 million gardens in the UK. The Wildlife Trusts has suggestions on its website on how to make these gardens more bee friendly <https://tinyurl.com/47pbmkcc>.

Perhaps if we save the bees Ra will not have cried in vain.

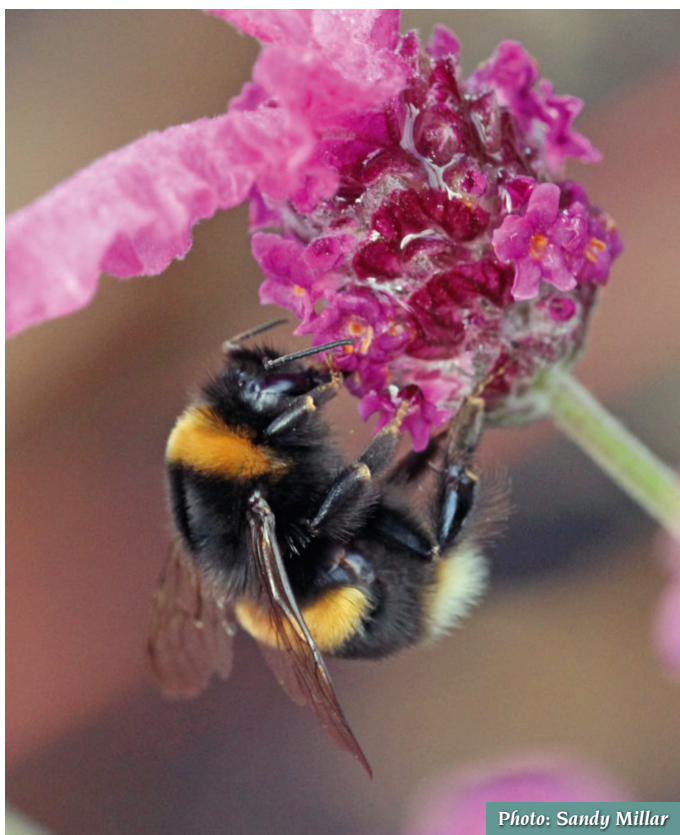


Photo: Sandy Millar

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