

GARDENING

TREE PLANTING IS ALL THE RAGE IN THE UK THIS WINTER, with everyone from the Queen to comedian Bill Bailey encouraging us to plant a tree. Their value for slowing the impact of climate change and cleaning the air we breathe is well known. And as anyone who has spent a morning walking through a wood absorbing the smells, sounds and colours will tell you, trees can improve our health and wellbeing. The Japanese even have a word for this delightful form of exercise: 'shinrin yoku' - or 'forest bathing'.

But did you know that some trees are also incredibly important for bees and other pollinators, providing large amounts of nectar and pollen at times of the year when other sources are in short supply.

One flowering tree can produce thousands, if not millions, of flowers so it's able to feed many more pollinators than wild flowers or shrubs covering the same area of ground.

I became aware of this when I took up urban beekeeping and soon realised that the delicious honey I harvested at the end of

each summer was made predominately from nectar collected from the highly-scented flowers that smother London's Lime trees at the end of June.

Over the years I have taken a keen interest in observing and researching the best trees for feeding many types of bees, especially in early spring and late summer when there are slim pickings in flower beds and meadows. It led me to produce a guide that shows how to create a nine-month long banquet for bees. It involves planting a mixture of native and non-native trees that blossom sequentially from February right through to October. But for that you need a lot of land - or a job as a tree officer!

So if you want join in the tree planting craze but can only plant *one* tree this winter, here's my list of the best early and late flowering garden-sized trees for bees.

The native trees will also provide leaves for caterpillars to munch on and the non-natives will extend the foraging season for all pollinators - as well as looking gorgeous. Some trees will even grow well in pots or planters on rooftops and patios.

Planting the right trees for bees

Just one garden-sized tree could make all the difference to a hungry pollinator, providing oodles of blossom and looking beautiful into the bargain. **Alison Benjamin** lists some perfect varieties to choose.



1 **Goat willow** (*Salix caprea*), also known as the pussy willow because the silver furry male catkins look like cat's paws, is one of the first signs of spring. Although these catkins are wind pollinated, their protein-rich pollen is much sought after when the Honey bee and Buff-tailed bumblebee queens start to lay eggs, which hatch into hungry larvae. The female catkins - on a separate tree - will produced early nectar as a reward for any visiting pollinators. It can grow to 10m but smaller varieties are available.

2 **Hazel trees** (*Corylus avellana*), are covered in a mass of bright yellow dangling catkins that brighten up any garden in February/March. Though they too are wind pollinated, they again provide much-needed pollen for bee larvae as well as producing edible hazelnuts in autumn. A large tree, it can easily be kept in check with judicious pruning.



3 **Cherry 'Okame'** (*Prunus X incam Okame*), has a profusion of small, pretty pink candyfloss-like blossom much earlier than other cherry trees. It was first bred in England, from two ornamental cherry species that originated in China and Japan. Planted in a sunny spot, it will be a magnet for bees and other pollinators foraging for nectar and pollen in March. Later-flowering cherries are also good for pollinators as long as they do not have double-headed flowers that insects cannot penetrate.

4 **Dwarf horse chestnut/Bottlebrush buckeye** (*Aesculus parviflora*), is a stunning small tree from the United States, with erect flower panicles that resemble our large traditional horse chestnut. But its feathery white plumes flower later, providing an important top-up of nectar for bees after the lime trees are spent. I've seen them growing successfully in large planters.

5 **Chinese privet** (*Ligustrum lucidum*), is a more handsome, small evergreen tree than the hedging privet with panicles of white flowers that provide much-needed pollen and nectar in late summer and early autumn when there is a dearth of food for queen bumblebees needing to fatten up before hibernation.



6 **Seven son flower tree** (*Heptacodium miconioides*), was the star attraction at RHS Chelsea 2021 for visiting bees and people alike. Native to China, it is a member of the honeysuckle family and has clusters of heavenly scented white flowers. It can be grown as a multi-stemmed shrub or small tree and I predict it will become widely planted throughout the UK, which will be a blessing for late foraging bees. I am going to try to find space for it in my small back garden.

7 **Crab apple** (*Malus sylvestris 'evestere'*), like all apple trees, seem to burst into blossom in late spring just as many solitary bees, including the red mason and tawny mining bees, appear. The tree needs pollinators to produce a bumper harvest of top-quality fruit. I've chosen this reliable, small crab apple because I've successfully grown it in pots and planters on rooftops and its showy white blossom is always buzzing with bees.



Trees are best planted from November to March. Check growing advice to follow the principles of Right tree, Right place to ensure the soil, site and growing conditions are all suitable for your chosen species.



8 **Oleaster** (*Elaeagnus Q X submacrophylla*), a silver-leaved tree often used for hedging or clipped into balls, has small, fragrant tubular flowers in clusters in October through to November providing invaluable food if it is allowed to bloom. And compact varieties can easily be grown in containers.

9 **Sweet Chestnut** (*Castanea sativa*), has flamboyant long fingers of whiteish flowers in mid July, whose nectar makes the most delectable dark, bitter honey. Unfortunately its huge size prohibits most of us from growing this southern European beauty, that was introduced by the Romans. Instead we could just let our neat Common privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*) hedges flower. Go on, give it a go! The small pungent white flowers may smell unpleasant to us (they have been unfavourably compared to cat's pee), but they attract myriad bees and other pollinators in July.



10 **Strawberry tree** (*Arbutus unedo*), is a shrubby evergreen that grows wild all over the Mediterranean. Unusually it bears fruit (round and red, left) while it is flowering. The white bell-shaped flowers are a life-saver for buff-tailed bumblebee queens stocking up on nectar as late as November.

See a fuller list of bee-friendly trees at www.urbanbees/trees



Find a sapling - some free!

In Europe the average country has 38% forest cover, compared to just 13% of the UK. Friends of the Earth wants to double Britain's forest cover while the National Trust has called for 20 million trees to be planted this decade. The Woodland Trust aims to plant 50m over the next five years and is giving away hundreds of thousands of trees to schools and communities as part of its **Big Climate Fightback** to help combat the climate crisis.

It has a variety of free tree packs to choose from - many include native spring and early summer flowering trees that would benefit pollinating insects.

It also sells a subsidised tree pack specially designed to create a small copse of bee and other pollinator-friendly trees, with species that flower at different times. And its bee-friendly garden mix features goat willow, hazel, crab apple and rowan.

The trees are supplied as 20-60cm tall saplings, which will reach an adult's head height in around eight years.

But, if like me, you are too impatient to

wait that long, I'd recommend buying a 1.5-2 metre high tree that's a few years old. It will blossom for bees just a few months after planting.

Whatever tree you plant, it could count towards **The Queen's Green Canopy**. This aims to create a green legacy to mark the 2022 platinum jubilee of Elizabeth II. The Queen and The Prince of Wales planted the first Jubilee tree at Windsor Castle last March. Add yours to The Queen's Green Canopy map and you can purchase a QGC commemorative plaque.

Another great initiative is **Trees For Streets**. This charity aims to fill urban streets with trees, helping councils plant 250,000 trees over the next 10 years. You can sponsor a new street tree to live outside your house or nearby.

The RHS has also launched a **planet-friendly gardening** campaign. It says if all the UK's 30 million gardeners planted a medium-sized tree, it would store enough carbon to equal driving more than 11 million times around our planet.

Woodland Trust Big Climate Fightback www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees
The Queen's Green Canopy www.queensgreencanopy.org
Trees For Streets Look for a scheme near you at www.treesforstreets.org
RHS planet-friendly gardening www.rhs.org.uk/advice/gardening-for-the-environment

Fascinating facts about pollinators & trees

Ever seen dead or dying bees under Lime trees? It was thought for a long time that nectar toxins were responsible but there is nothing in nectar that poisons bees. Another explanation could be the

caffeine

in the nectar combined with the far reaching sweet scent attracting the bees from such a distance that they run out of energy and starve. But no one really knows for sure.

Two

very early flying solitary mining bees derive their names from the only trees from which they collect nectar and pollen: the Large and Small Sallow Mining Bee.

Oak trees support an estimated **2,300** species of wildlife, including the very rare solitary Oak Mining Bee.

The Hawthorn tree can support more than

300

insects including a namesake moth and beetle, and a solitary mining bee that feasts on its blossom.

The Fork-Tailed Flower Bee, mason bees and leafcutters are among the

320

so-called 'saproxylic' pollinating insects that breed, nest or feed on dead wood and decaying trees.

The slender and elegant Hawthorn moth

The Ivy Mining Bee is the last solitary bee to emerge in the autumn, just as the tiny white pin-cushion Ivy flowers burst open. Though not a tree, this climber often uses trees as a support. It can take ten years before ivy matures and starts to flower providing valuable late nectar for more than

140

insect species.

The Holly tree sustains the spring caterpillars of the blue butterfly named after it. But the

Holly Blue has a second generation in the summer whose caterpillars feed on ivy leaves.

Britain's second largest butterfly, the elusive and regal Purple Emperor needs Oak trees & Goat Willow to thrive. The males congregate on tall oaks and await a mate to join them. The females then lay their eggs on Goat Willow which feeds the caterpillars. Their decline is thought to have been caused by the large-scale clearance of scrub and the fragmentation of ancient woodland.

The Purple Emperor prefers aphid honeydew and tree sap to nectar, though it also comes to ground to feed on animal dung and carrion.

