The Fascinating Bumblebee

by Carol Ann Harlos

I recently worked with a group of high school students who were volunteering to clean up a garden at a local school. They were delightful, friendly, and hardworking. But they were afraid of bees – especially bumblebees. But as I explained to them, there was nothing to fear and much to learn.

Many folks don't realize the importance of these native species. There are over 200 species of bumblebees belonging to the genus Bombus. We recognize them because they are hairy bees and look soft and fuzzy. Sometimes the hairs are in alternating bands of yellow and black and some species can be entirely black.

There are other hairy bee species, but bumblebee females have a bare spot on the hind legs which helps them carry pollen. Bumblebees feed on nectar and pollen. They process nectar with enzymes to produce a watery material to feed their young. Bumblebees are the only native bee species that live in colonies. The colonies consist of 30 to 50 bees and are usually underground. One of my fondest memories is the colony that lived near a corner of our children's sandbox probably in a hole that was excavated by voles. The girls were taught to observe, not disturb, and in fact, no one was ever stung. I truly loved seeing how our children taught their friends about the bumblebees.

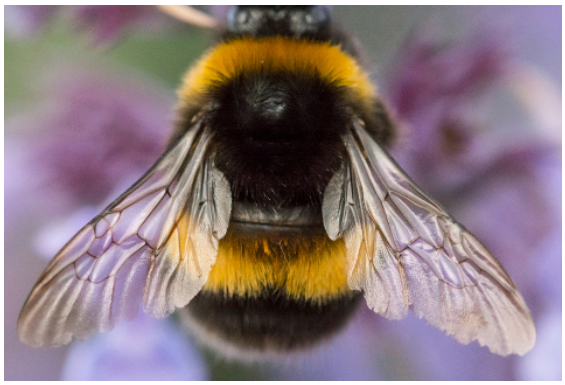
One female bumblebee is responsible for nest construction and egg laying. There are several overlapping generations of bumblebees in the nest. Sometime late in the season both queens and males are produced.

The last group of female queen bees that make it through the end of summer find different spots to reside over the winter. (This is the reason gardeners are encouraged to leave some debris in the garden, especially hollow stems for the future queen bumblebees.) The original female queen, all the workers, and all the males die at the end of the season.

Bumblebees have longer tongues than other bee species. As they drink nectar and collect pollen, they accidentally pollinate plants. They do make honey-like substances, just enough to feed the developing larvae and themselves during times of bad weather.

A group of scientists sent a letter to the United States Department of Agriculture Plant Health and Inspection Service asking that regulations be made to protect wild honeybees from commercial bumblebees which pollinate greenhouse grown vegetables. Sometimes commercial bumblebees escape through greenhouse vents, and their parasites are picked up by wild bumblebees. Bumblebees have been in decline since the 1980s. It is believed this is related to disease.

Looking to attract some bumblebees? Here is a partial list of plants they find particularly attractive: alyssum, lemon balm, basil, Bergenia, blackberries, blueberries, borage, butterfly bush, chervil, potentilla, cinquefoil, comfrey, coriander, costmary, delphiniums, dill, and more!



Bumblebee image from Canva

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