

Why are our bees dying?

Honey Bees

Honey bees are under real pressure. Billions of bees are dying and one in three colonies died last winter alone.

Honey bee colonies live in very densely packed hives so, if they become infected, diseases can spread very quickly. Think about how quickly you can pass on a cold to your family or class mates?!

One of the biggest threats currently facing honey bees is the varroa mite. This mite moved from Asia to Europe and reached the UK in 1992. It now infests 95% of hives.

The mites, who are related to spiders, suck the blood of the bees, especially in their larval stages, and pass viruses on to the bees.

The best ways to treat the mites are with a combination of physical, biological and chemical methods: for example removing mites or infected cells, using chemicals, or using hygienic bees – bees which remove dead pupae and larvae from the hives.

The honey bees can be treated with certain chemicals to kill the mites but unfortunately they are developing resistance to these so they have little effect. When mite numbers rise the bees are overwhelmed and the colony dies! Untreated bee colonies die in 3 to 4 years and even low populations of mites affects the bees' health.

Nearly all wild honey bee colonies have now died out and without bee keepers to look after them and treat these infections, Honey bees could die out altogether in a few years.

Bumblebees

Three of the 25 UK bumblebee species are already extinct, a further five are on the critically endangered list and another 2 species are due for inclusion.

The reason that bumblebees have declined in the countryside is because bees feed exclusively on pollen and nectar, and there are far fewer flowers in the countryside than there once were. Hedges have been dug up and marshes drained. In particular, grasslands which are rich in wildflowers have been almost entirely replaced with fields full of cereals, which do not provide food for bees. Bumblebees also need 'plant corridors' to travel around the country and to avoid in-breeding.

All bees...

The factors involved in declining bee populations are complicated and not fully understood. As well as those mentioned above, other factors involved can include the use of insecticides and changing weather patterns. Insecticides used to kill agricultural pests may harm bees if these are applied incorrectly or without care. Recent wet and cold summers have prevented bees from foraging for food and have affected the time of year that forage plants appear so bees cannot find enough nectar and starve.

