

## The Api:Cultural guide to planting for bees on Balconies

Planting to help bees when you don't have a garden can be tricky. Here in the city, many of us live in high rise apartments or flats with little personal outdoor space, gardens for the majority of city dwellers are a luxury. If we're lucky we may have a window ledge large enough to accommodate a window box, a small balcony or if we're very fortunate a roof terrace.

Even in a small confined space such as a balcony or small roof terrace it is possible to attract a large number of bees and other pollinating insects.

Choose plants that do well in containers and can tolerate shallow growing conditions and climate extremes. Maritime and alpine plants will do well on high rise buildings as they have adaptations to cope with growing at altitude such as waxy, leathery or narrow leaves to avoid moisture loss caused by winds blowing through them.

Plants that are low growing and don't have long slender flower stalks will grow better at height than tall ones which may be blown over or snapped.

Many garden centres stock a good range of alpines and maritime plants that will grow well at height in exposed conditions are readily available from wild flower plug suppliers.

Some examples of plants I grow on my balcony and window boxes on my 4th floor apartment include:

- Saxifrage peter Pan - popular with sweat bees.
- Thrift - popular with honey bees and short tongued bumble bees.
- Chives - favourite of bumble bees.
- Early flowering species crocus - popular with most bees.
- Alpine Squill - visited by honey bees.
- Giant Squill – grows wild on Mediterranean coastal cliffs.
- Christmas rose – copes well at height provided its protected from strong winds. Honey and bumble bees will collect pollen from it.
- Hebe - copes well with windy conditions, especially the dwarf varieties. the flowers are visited by a wide range of bees.
- Wall Flower Bowles mauve - wall flowers often grow in windy positions in the wild. They are popular with bumble bees, hairy footed flower bees and butterflies.
- Aubretia - popular with bees and butterflies and tolerates wind exposure.
- Sedums - grow wild in mountain and coastal habitats. Flowers are attractive to bees and hoverflies.
- Lavender. Grows wild in coastal and mountain habitats in its native Mediterranean. Copes well in exposed but sunny positions and grows well in poor shallow soil. Favourite with bumble bees. Choose hybrid varieties like 'Edelweiss' and 'Gross Bleu' which are more attractive to bees than the traditional English lavenders such as Hidcote.
- Oregano - one of the most popular plants with honey bees - will grow well in window boxes even at height.

- Thyme. Often grows in exposed habitats in the wild and will grow well in window boxes even at height. Attractive to honey bees.
- Devils bit Scabious - native flower attractive to bees, shorter than the more common field scabious and won't be blown over by winds.
- Birds foot trefoil - native flower popular with bees, tolerates exposed aspects.
- Bearded hawkbit - dandelion like flower attractive to bees.
- Sea and bladder Campion's - native plants of coastal areas.
- Eryngium (sea holly) there are many dwarf garden cultivars of this UK native plant attractive to pollinators that like its wild ancestor will grow well in exposed but sunny positions.
- Spanish Gorse - A very prickly and diminutive relative of Gorse this plant produces yellow flowers attractive to bees.
- *Campanula rapunculoides* - A creeping bell flower popular with honey bees and short tongued bumble bees.
- Cow Slip – Native primula tolerant of exposed conditions.

These represent but a few of the plants which will attract bees to a moderately high balcony or roof terrace providing it receives some sun for at least part of the day.

Where possible try to position your plants to protect them from the worst of the drying winds and where they will receive the most sun. Plants at height may dry out quicker than plants at ground level because the winds will wick moisture away from their leaves so you may need to water more frequently.

If you live very high up then you will be less likely to be visited by bees which naturally forage not much higher than tree canopy height (you will however have a lovely display of flowers). Honey bees in particular, which use complex communications to inform their hive members where to locate the best forage have no way of communicating height in their waggle dances so are unlikely to visit very tall buildings to forage.

When planting up your balcony or roof terrace choose the biggest containers you can comfortably fit in your space, safely move and transport. Rather than using pure soil or compost try mixing in Perlite with the compost or hydroponic expanded clay pebbles which will reduce the weight of the containers when full.

You can also add moisture retaining gel crystals to reduce the frequency of watering and prevent plants from drying out and or insert a pipe into the container through which you can pour water so that it reaches the roots directly and is not wasted on the soils surface.