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Bumble Bees

By Cass Turnbull

Just yesterday I was going to prune a high branch off of a climbing rose, but to do so I had to wade through a patch of blooming lavender. As I headed in, the garden owner spoke up, 'Watch out! It's full of bees.' Usually this would stop me in my tracks or cause an extremely hasty exit. In my business encountering bees is one of the two most common occupational hazards. There is a good reason that your five-year-old kid comes inside the house wailing and bawling after being stung. It hurts. It hurts a lot. You tend to forget that when you grow up.



I don't. I'm somewhat allergic, so as I work my way through a garden, I pick up on the slightest sound of buzzing. When I think I hear it, I stop and look cautiously around for the source while my heart rate increases. But I wasn't worried in the lavender bed because it was covered in bumble bees, not honey bees. Bumble bees are so docile that if you move slowly enough, they don't even notice you're there. The fact is, I enjoy seeing bumble bees. It's a perk of my job. To me they are the teddy bears of the bug world. Plump, fuzzy, a little bit clumsy, and so very mild mannered.

They are so mild mannered that the researcher/writer of Bumble Bees.org managed to catch 115 of them and put a number on each of them without getting stung. See photo of Pink 38 below. The bees do sometimes get annoyed, however, and they will show their aggravation by lifting a middle leg, as if to say, "Uh, wait a minute. I don't like that. Please back away," buzzing as they do so.

Have you ever encountered what looks like a sick bumble bee on a cold spring morning, buzzing on the ground? She went out early in the morning and ran out of energy or got cold or wet. She is buzzing to try to warm up and must do so in order to fly. Bumble bees have a metabolic rate that is 75% higher than a hummingbird's. They need a lot of food energy.



When you see this sort of bumble bee - one that is in trouble, don't pick it up in your hand and blow on it. They don't like that. But you can use a piece of paper or a card to gently move it to a warmer location. If it is really cold out, it is acceptable to try to feed it or take it inside to warm it up, using an eyedropper to place a little sugar water droplet next to her. Don't get any on her, though.

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On the other hand, if you run across a single bee sort of stuck inside a flower in the morning, probably what you have is a male bumble bee before he gets warm enough to move on. He spent the night there. Male bees don't live in the nest with the rest of the workers (females) and the queen. Male bumble bees are around for one reason only. You can guess it, I'm sure. They fly around in the day, drinking nectar to feed themselves (not taking any back to the nest) and look for queens. In other words, they stay out all night, and drink and carouse all day.



Mr. Google has supplied me with lots of interesting information on bumble bees. For one thing, their genus is *Bombus*. Great name. Bumble bees make something called 'pollen loafs' to feed their baby larva and themselves. The amount of time bumble bees take to mate varies from 10 to 80 minutes (!). Bumble bees are specialized pollinators, with each bee choosing only one or two species to visit. That makes them great for certain greenhouse crops like tomatoes that honeybees don't pollinate. Bumbles 'buzz pollinate' which means they shake the tightly held pollen free from the flower with a vibration that resonates (or is tuned) to the plant species. You may have noticed bumble bees humming inside of foxglove flowers. And I thought they were just happy because they were getting high.



Unlike honey bees, bumble bees build nests that are sort of disorganized and are smaller, holding about 80 individuals instead of a honey bee hive of 50,000. Their nests, as well as the queen's hibernation site, are found *in* the ground or *on* the ground--in dead tussocks of grass, beneath unkempt hedges, abandoned mouse holes, the base of walls, tree roots, in sheds, woodpiles, in hollow tubes of dead plant stems, or in the dry loose soil of a slope or bank. Sometimes the nest is even in a compost pile.

I'll always remember one day when I decided to disassemble a pile of composted leaves that I had covered with black plastic the previous season. I use the tarping to indicate that a pile is 'closed' and should not be added to with fresh material.

When I peeled back the tarp, I beheld a slowly floating sea of chubby, back and gold bumble bees. Very cool! I quickly realized that I had 'blown their cover,' gently replaced it and moved on. Still, it was a quite sight to see.

Bumble bees come in short and long tongued versions. Their tongues are used to slurp up nectar. Some bumble bees have tongues that are longer than their bodies. (How does that work I wonder? Is the tongue sort of rolled up like a New Year's party favor? The kind you blow on one end and it unrolls and tweets?) The long tongues make them perfect for pollinating plants with long tubular flowers and other hard-to-get flowers like clover. Hey, you know, the sleek honey bees can't do that!



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The short-tongued bumble bees get around alright too, frequenting other flowers and both types can always go out for some fast food by visiting a leaf covered in honeydew.



Then there are the robber bumble bees. Who can blame them? Their tongues are too short to get down into the bottom of a snap dragon flower, with its enticing aroma and super charged nectar. So these short-tongued bees cut corners. They attach themselves to the base of, say, a snap dragon flower and gnaw a little hole in it where the nectar is. Other little critters will use this same hole later for the same reason, as the flower refills with nectar again. Next time you are near a snap dragon, you may want to search for their holes. Then you will know it's been visited by a naughty bumble bee.

Please feel free to use this new found information to justify leaving the bottom of the hedge un-raked, or a pile of unkempt firewood, or to skip the last mow of the season, or to feel better about the clover in your lawn. No food, no habitat, means no bumble bees. And that would be a shame.

