Debunking myths

Are you doing the right thing to help?

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan has received a huge amount of support across all sectors. We are incredibly grateful to each and every person who has answered the call to action. Thousands of positive changes have already been made to help address the critical problem of pollinator decline.

It is the beginning of a long journey, but pollinators are undoubtedly better off than before we all began this process. However, sometimes certain ideas can take hold that are not necessarily the most effective evidence-based actions. If you are generous enough to help we want to make sure that what you are doing is the right thing and is having as positive an impact as possible. Some common myths are addressed in this document.
One third of Ireland’s 98 wild bee species are threatened with extinction

© Steven Falk
We need to manage the landscape in a way that provides these wild bees with the **food, shelter and safety** they need to survive.

- As pollinators, they are a keystone group so protecting them helps protect biodiversity generally.

- In doing this you also create a landscape that can support a managed pollinator (honeybee).

The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan provides evidence-based actions for each sector outlining ways to help. See the website for more information: [www.pollinators.ie](http://www.pollinators.ie)
Myth 1: I need to change what I’m already doing

Always think carefully about what already exists within the land you manage. Our landscape is full of little pockets of excellent habitat for pollinators. These might not be what we humans think of as good, but they are lifesavers to our insects. Always be careful not to replace what is already important!

- Small wild areas with bramble/ivy (food)
- Flowering hedgerows (food)
- Earth banks for mining solitary bees to nest (shelter)
- Unsprayed walls for cavity nesting solitary bees (shelter)
- Small patches of naturally occurring wildflowers (food)
Myth 2: Honeybees need our help – I should get hives

Honeybees are not in trouble – these wild bees need our help!
Honeybees are a managed pollinator and are often classified as livestock. Adding honeybee hives to the landscape is **NOT** a biodiversity action. If you need more hives you can get a new nucleus colony from existing stock. One third of our 98 wild bee species are at risk of extinction. If lost, they will be almost impossible to replace.

Honeybees are not in decline and the number of beekeepers continues to increase. If we have too many hives in the landscape, honeybees will compete for floral resources with wild bees making their situation even more precarious. Honeybees also need care and attention from *trained* beekeepers as poorly managed hives can create a disease risk for wild bees.

**To maintain pollination service we need an abundance and diversity of wild bees and other insects in combination with healthy honeybees.**

Beekeeping is very important and you should keep honeybees if you want to make honey or start a new hobby. If your motivation is to help conserved bees or biodiversity there are lots of other simpler and more effective actions you can take to help. Visit [www.pollinators.ie](http://www.pollinators.ie) to find out more.
Myth 3: It’s hard to provide food for bees

We know what flowers our wild bees are most dependent on. Even by simply taking these actions you can help:

✓ Don’t cut the grass as often so that Dandelion, Clover (Red & White), Knapweed & Bird’s-foot-trefoil have a chance to grow amongst the grass at certain times

✓ Plant some Willow to flower in early spring

✓ If you have wild corners, tolerate some Bramble and Bush Vetch

✓ Add some pollinator-friendly plants to your garden e.g., Lavender, Comfrey

Top 10 plants across the year:
In order of number of submitted foraging sightings:
1. Dandelion
2. Bramble
3. Bush Vetch
4. Knapweed
5. Lavender
6. Bird’s-foot-trefoil
7. Clover (Red & White)
8. Willow
9. Cotoneaster
10. Comfrey
Myth 4: Hanging baskets can’t become pollinator-friendly

The annual bedding plants that we’re used to are not pollinator friendly as they don’t contain pollen and nectar. The good news is that you can make two excellent additions that will look just as good and provide food for pollinators.

Mix the following plants into your hanging basket to make it pollinator-friendly: Bidens, Bacopa

NOT GOOD FOR POLLINATORS

Very brightly coloured annuals like Geranium, Begonia, Busy Lizzy, Primula, Daffodil, Salvia splendens don’t provide food

Bidens mixed in

Bacopa

Bidens
Myth 5: Bigger bee boxes are better

- Larger bee boxes or insect hotels will attract predators and are more likely to harbour disease
- They should be placed 1.5-2m off the ground in a sheltered south or east facing location
- They must be close to food sources – solitary bees don’t fly far!
- These boxes only target a small number of our cavity nesting solitary bees. Don’t forget that 80% of our solitary bees nest in bare ground which is even easier to create by scraping back vegetation!
- You’ll know your box is being used if the cavity entrances have been closed off with pieces of leaf or mud. If it’s not being used consider moving it to a new location

Ideal size for a solitary bee nest box

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Myth 6: Not cutting the grass isn’t working – I need to plant wildflower seed!

Natural meadows:

✓ Reducing mowing is the most cost-effective way to help pollinators
✓ Can provide food from spring through to autumn

Options:

A: Long-flowering meadow – one cut and lift per year
B: Short-flowering ‘4-6 week meadow’ – cut and lift
C: Let the Dandelions bloom! Cut as normal but allow Dandelions to flower in March-April
Don’t Mow Let it Grow - not cutting grass so often is the best and cheapest way to provide more food for pollinators

Cut once a year – food and shelter

Cut on a 4-6 weekly rotation from mid April - food

Cut regularly

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Meadow myth: this doesn’t look good to me so it mustn’t be working!

Meadows don’t have to look spectacular to humans to be good for pollinators!

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Meadow myth: If I stop cutting the grass it’ll be lovely straight away and I won’t have to do anything else!

Natural meadows still need some management and you have to be patient.

NATIONAL BIODIVERISTY DATA CENTRE MEADOW

This meadow is natural – we simply cut once in September and remove the grass.

In the initial years we manually removed these species:

- **Ragwort**
- **Docks**
- **Nettles**
- **Hogweed**

It has taken four years to develop into a flower-rich meadow. The annual cut in September must be removed to reduce soil fertility over time and give the wildflower seeds in the soil a chance to compete with the grass.
Most natural meadows take a number of years to develop!

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY DATA CENTRE MEADOW

Year 1-2 (mainly grass)

By year 4 (mix grass & wildflowers)

The annual cut in September should be removed to reduce soil fertility over time. Over a number of years the meadow will naturally become more flower-rich with local species that are adapted to the site’s conditions.

It will never look like this – but this is not a natural habitat and is not better for pollinators.

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Other meadow tips:

If you don’t want a full meadow it is fine to cut around where flowers are naturally growing.

If the grass growth is very strong cut sooner e.g. in July and again in September. After a few years as soil fertility is lowered, this earlier cut will no longer be necessary and one cut at the end of the summer will be enough.

In mid-late August you need to **persevere** with the ‘dead-looking stage’ as many plants will be dropping their seed now. If you let this happen you’ll have more flowers the following year.

Where possible, let the annual cut lie for a few days before lifting, again so that the seeds have a chance to disperse. However, don’t worry if this is simply not practical.

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Myth 7: There is no easy way to track if my actions are having a positive impact

The National Biodiversity Data Centre runs various monitoring schemes that you can participate in [https://pollinators.ie/record-pollinators/](https://pollinators.ie/record-pollinators/)

The simplest one only takes 10 minutes of your time!

![Flower-Insect Timed Count (FIT Count)](image)

Watch a 50x50cm patch of flowers for 10 minutes and record how many insects visit.

This survey takes place between April and September. Repeat across the year and in future years to see how your site is doing. For more information visit the website and click on the link:

[www.pollinators.ie](http://www.pollinators.ie)
Visit the website to learn more:

https://pollinators.ie/record-pollinators/fit-count/
Don’t forget to register your actions and put your pollinator-friendly location on the map

https://pollinators.biodiversityireland.ie