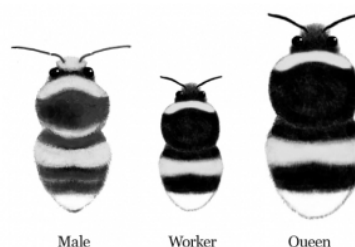


## Bumblebees

At this time of year you sometimes see a huge bumblebee taking a last chance to sip nectar from the late autumn flowers in the garden in order to fatten herself up for her forthcoming hibernation. These are the mated queens who will spend the next 6 months under the ground in a sheltered spot, waiting for the spring and the vital nectar of the spring flowers such as snowdrops and primroses.



Once they have woken up and fed well, they will search for a nest site - they are frequently seen in spring zig-zagging across lawns and along hedge-banks looking for a suitable spot. This will often be a hole in the ground such as an old mouse hole, or a nice space under an old grass tussock, or under a shed or in a compost heap. (The tree bumblebee, a recent arrival from the continent, prefers a tree hole, a bird box or a roof cavity) Here the solitary queen will raise her first small brood of workers all on her own. Once the workers have grown to maturity life becomes a little easier for her - she simply stays at home and lays eggs while the workers find nectar and pollen and look after the youngsters. The colony may reach a size of perhaps 400 bees. Later in the summer some of the eggs turn into new queens and males, both of which leave the nest to mate. The nest then gradually dies out and at the age of about 1 year, the original queen dies.

We can expect to see up to 8 species of bumblebees in our gardens in Pembrokeshire. Most of them are easy to identify if you look very carefully at the pattern of yellow stripes and the colour of the tail - though I personally struggle with the various different species with white(ish) tails and yellow stripes! The Bumblebee Conservation Trust has an excellent website here [www.bumblebeeconservation.org](http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org) with good pictures for help in identification.

Unlike in the UK in general, in Pembrokeshire I think that bumblebees are still doing quite well as we have plenty of cliff top grassland with abundant wild flowers. And Pembrokeshire is home to one of the rarest bumblebees in the UK, the shrill carder bee, which makes its home on the Castlemartin peninsula.

And lastly - one of the most serious predators of bumblebees are badgers. It is common not to realise you have a bumblebee nest in the garden (there is not a lot of coming and going so they are not very conspicuous) until it is excavated by badgers leaving the sad sight of a gaping hole and a few disorientated and homeless bees. Bumblebees are also predated by cuckoo bumblebees which lay their eggs in bumblebee nests, they are eaten by birds, the hibernating queens can be eaten by mice and voles - it's amazing actually that any survive! So give them all the help you can with late autumn and early spring nectar in the garden.

Rosemary Royle