

15 Plants that Help Bees through the Winter

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Bees pollinate nearly three-quarters of the fruits, vegetables nuts and herbs we eat. In fact, we depend on bees for *our* survival! So let's help feed the bees by with blooms that provide pollen and nectar throughout the winter by growing plants and flowering trees that bloom during the colder seasons or bloom in late winter or very early spring.

In the temperate maritime climate of south coast British Columbia and Vancouver Island, a surprising number of hardy annuals, perennials, bulbs and flowering trees bloom in the fall, winter, or early spring. This tendency has increased in certain years as climate change brings warmer temperatures that keep annuals blooming all winter.

Successive Cold-Weather Flowers

Because domestic honey bees are still active in colder months, they need winter-blooming flowers that provide pollen and nectar. They forage on dry days in winter when temperatures reach 13°C (55°F) or more. Native bees, most of whom are solitary nesters, need warmer weather to begin pollinating so typically do not emerge until spring. In cities, however, where many warm spaces and gardens with cold-weather flowering plants provide protection and food, bumblebee queens have been seen foraging as early as January.

Among the annuals, calendula/Pot Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) reliably blooms until November in coastal areas when spent flowers are cut back for continued blooms. In mild years with no hard frost, calendula blooms all winter and provides early spring flowers for bees and flower flies. Annual borage, also blooms through early winter until a hard frost.



(image: bee on calendula, BC Farms & Food magazine)



(image: December frost on borage, © J. Canning, 2013)

Aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*) and snow drops (*Galanthus* spp) will accompany crocus, especially the species types like *C. tommasinianus* to feed bees as early as January and February. Early species tulips, like *T. fosteriana* will bloom in late February and March. All of these hardy bulbs provide welcome early colour for you as well as food for bees.



(image: bee on 'tommy' crocus, © J. Canning, 2016)

Even before the early fruit trees, like plums, witch hazel is the star. This charming large shrub or small tree will bloom – depending on the cultivar – in mid-autumn or in late winter.

Among the vines, winter Jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) is a reliable winter bloomer. It is hardy and can tolerate temperatures down to 0°F (-18°C).

Border shrubs and larger groups of flowers attract more pollinators than solitary flowers dispersed throughout the garden. In the cold days, bees will benefit from being able to forage in one place rather than exhaust themselves by flying long distances, perhaps unable to get back to a protected area before the sun sets. This type of landscaping also provides better protection against predators.

The guide below shows the approximate dates for cold-hardy blooms that help bees through the winter in southern maritime British Columbia.

Cold-Hardy Flowers that Attract Bees in Winter in South Coast BC & Vancouver Island

Plant	Plant Type	Approximate Bloom Dates
Calendula	hardy annual	Spring – November, year-round if no hard frost
Garlic Chives	hardy perennial herb	June – November
Crocus, snowdrop, hyacinth, iris reticulata, aconite, species tulips	perennial bulbs	January – March
Snapdragon	hardy annual	Spring, fall, yr-round if no frost
Hardy fuchsia	hardy perennial	June – November,
Borage	hardy annual herb	June – December
Verbena	perennial	June – November
Chamomile	hardy annual herb	June – November,
Yarrow	hardy perennial herb	April – November, Year-round if no hard frost
Rosemary	evergreen perennial herb	Varies,: arch / April, November / December
Primrose	hardy perennial	Midwinter – Spring, October / November
Heather (<i>Erica</i> spp)	low-growing evergreen shrub	Typically November – May
Oregon Grape (<i>Mahonia</i> spp)	evergreen native shrub	March - June
Witch Hazel (<i>Hamamelis</i> spp)	deciduous shrub or small tree	September – October & February – March
Early Blooming Fruit Trees (Cherry, Apple, Plum, etc.)	deciduous tree	Starting in February
Winter jasmine (<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i>)	Vine or ground cover	November – April

With thanks for additional scientific data from:

[www.Honey Bee Suite.com](http://www.HoneyBeeSuite.com)

www.Permies.com

Invasive species Council, BC

“A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants,” DK Publishers, London, UK