

BLUEBELLS OR HYACINTHS?



Years ago the darker blue, sweet smelling Spring flowering plants were called hyacinths in Scotland. (The Latin name is *Hyacinthoides non scripta*).

The Scots bluebell was the lighter blue one of the Campanula family which flowers in the summer - also known as a harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*). Did the variety that almost everyone now calls bluebell flower earlier this year? The first ones had emerged by 8th April on a sheltered south facing slope in the Alva Woodland Park. But we must compare like with like at the same site, from dated photos taken in the Yellowcraig Wood (above Logie Kirk) since 2003. Using one's judgement as to how plentiful the plants were, it is possible to say that the bluebells were earlier this year than in 2006, 2005 and 2003 but they were also early in 2004.

Honey bee shortage in Bridge of Allan

Will our fruit trees and bushes not be pollinated this year? Will local honey no longer be available?



A female honey bee at work

There have been stories in the national press recently about the "Mary Celeste" or "Colony Collapse Disorder, CCD". The *Scotsman* of April 14th carried one such story: "Honey bees are suffering major declines in countries around the world in a mystery which threatens the future of ecosystems crucial to farming".

Unfortunately this renowned newspaper illustrated the article with photos of bumble bees!

The Scottish Beekeepers' Association believes that, at least in Scotland, there is strong evidence that an important factor in the problem is infestation with the parasitic varroa mite.

Over the last ten years Scottish beekeepers have had to protect their hives by substances such as Apistan or Bayvarol against this threat to their bees. Also removing the drone brood where the varroa can raise up even more offspring. However, as Dr. Peterson told me in a recent

telephone conversation, sometimes the treatment may not be 100% effective and the varroa mites can build up again and, if unchecked, may wipe out the colony. Also a strong stock of bees may rob honey from a neighbouring weak stock and bring back the varroa to their own hive. Dr. Peterson also said that the varroa mites have killed off the many feral or wild honey bees (not bumble bees) that have resulted from swarms over the years and taken up residence in holes in trees, lofts etc. These feral honey bees have also been important pollinators in the past.

Honey bees have been around for millions of years - long before we started farming them to make it easier to remove the honey. (Remember the excellent Channel 4 series about the Baka people? We were shown a tiny half-naked man who climbed an enormous tree in the Cameroon rain forest, calmed the bees with smoke and lowered down basketfuls of honeycomb to his delighted tribespeople!) When you buy Scottish flower or heather honey spare a thought for the entirely different problems that the bees and the beekeepers are facing now.

With a small hand-operated sprayer the plants can be targeted accurately without killing surrounding native wild flowers. So how does Roundup, whose main constituent is glyphosate work? The chemical is absorbed and moved to other parts of the plant including the roots. Glyphosate blocks the plant's ability to produce proteins. The plant gradually dies from the lack of essential proteins for plant growth. The actual biochemistry is exceedingly complex and anyone wanting to go beyond this simple explanation should do a Google search on the Internet "How does glyphosate work?" and check out the Wikipedia website.

The Roundup or glyphosate sold at garden centres is already diluted, but the same principles apply. So be careful where you spray it - even the green bark of young trees, green stems of roses and raspberries for instance, can take it in.

The more vigorously a weed is growing the more effective is Roundup. If you jump on a weed before or after spraying or hoeing it, spraying is likely to be ineffective. Also rain within six



Giant Hogweed

But what happens to the thousands of dead bees that the varroa have killed?

The CCD phenomenon was first called the Mary Celeste syndrome as hives have been found almost empty, as though the bees had abandoned their home en masse. Dr. Peterson quoted the case of an Edinburgh beekeeper who just happened to be watching one of her hives when thousands of bees started crawling out of the entrance in some distressed state, into the grass, up plant stems and began to die there. Two days later all the dead bees had disappeared, presumably eaten by birds or insects.

The local Association has three hives of bees in the Bridge of Allan area on a quiet part of the University Campus, near the Hermitage Wood. These are all alive and well and were observed recently working hard. (There are also hives up at Drumdrills). These may be the only honey bees to visit our gardens. So I feel quite privileged that a number of them have been collecting nectar from the same patch of geranium microrrhizum for three days now over a mile from the hives. Amazing creatures - if one worker finds a good source of nectar she goes back to the hive and does a dance which tells her sisters exactly where to go to find it! The amount they can carry is infinitesimal, whilst hundreds of workers stay in the hive fanning their wings to evaporate the high water content of the nectar to make honey. Thousands of bee journeys are necessary to carry back enough nectar to be evaporated, stored and eventually to be extracted to make one pot of honey.

Good news - my plum and apple trees have been pollinated. Hope yours have too!

Giant Hogweed in Bridge of Allan

This photo was taken in 2003 looking across the Forglen Burn towards the Haws Park football field. Some attempt was made by Stirling Council that year and in 2004 to stop seeds forming by "head-bagging". But by 2005 flowers were allowed to form seeds. I offered my services to help clear and burn these seed heads. Last year the cutting process started earlier and no plants were allowed to form seeds. This year I started spraying many hundreds of plants in this area early in April with Roundup Pro Active, obtainable in 5-litre containers from Terra Firma of Manor Business Park near Blairlogie. Made by Monsanto it has to be diluted one part to 50 parts water and takes two to three weeks before turning the Giant Hogweed leaves yellow and eventually killing the plant.

hours can reduce the effect of glyphosate. Monsanto, the original manufacturers of Roundup' claim that properly used the product is non-toxic to humans, animals and aquatic life. However, there are also other chemicals called surfactants added to the pure glyphosate to make it more easily absorbed into the leaves. It is suspected that these chemicals, which Monsanto keep secret, may be quite toxic especially to aquatic life.

It is also being reported that, where farmers have been controlling weeds with glyphosate for many years, a number of weeds, particularly in the USA, have developed a resistance to the chemical. So let us hope we can eliminate the Giant Hogweed before it develops a resistance to Roundup.

Cocksburn Reservoir

Sunday 13th May: Remedial work still ongoing. Only a small area of water about 15 feet below normal level. Two adult swans on an exposed rock with no chance of nesting this year. Has anyone seen the four cygnets from last year that flew away earlier this year?

Roy Baker

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