



Bee-friendly gardening is responsible gardening. With bees in trouble worldwide, our gardens are vital restaurants for bees, butterflies and other beneficial bugs.

Friends of the Earth partnered with 2015 RTE Super Garden finalist and permaculture expert, Suzie Cahn, to design a garden at Bloom in the Park 2017 that provided food, shelter and nesting places for bees and other pollinators. The garden showed visitors everything a bee or pollinator needs to thrive.

Here are some tips from our own garden to help bring ‘The Bright Side of Life’ to yours this summer:

- 1. Make it easy for bees to chow down** - Our garden had two large planters filled with pollinator-attracting annuals, herbs and other blossoming shrubs and plants that are good for pollinators. We planted flowers that made it easy for bees to access pollen. Open flowers and older varieties, such as poppies, corn cockle, and oxide daisies, are very bee-friendly. New varieties with double and triple blossoms make it difficult, if not impossible, for bees to access pollen.
 - **Plant flowers in a variety of sizes that blossom throughout the year** to encourage a diverse range of bees in the garden. Willow fences bloom early and make an ideal first food source when bees come out of hibernation.
 - **Kitchen herbs can provide food for both you and the bees** - Balcony herbs, such as chives, rosemary and thyme, all have flowers bees love. Let the herbs flower so that they not only flavour your food, but also provided food for bees.
 - **Raise flowers from seeds.** Studies show even [so-called “bee friendly” plants sold in U.K. nurseries are laden with harmful chemicals such as neonicotinoids](#). To ensure your flowers are truly bee-friendly, sow your own flowers from seed from reputable organisations such as **Irish Seed Savers, Brown Envelope Seeds, or the Organic Centre**, which all provide varieties for Ireland and the British Isles. Meadow seeds from [wildflowers.ie](#) are another option, offering both food for bees and the chance to preserve Irish wildflowers.

2. **Provide healthy soil** - The soil is the “restaurant” for the flowers and a space of engagement between the sun and our planet. It’s both a food provider and carbon sink, and its health determines our own health.
 - **Go chemical free** – Pesticides such as neonicotinoids have been found to be directly harmful to bees. Even chemicals, such as glyphosate (found in RoundUp), which may not directly affect bees, still damage the food, water, soil and general ecosystem health in which bees depend. While some may argue we need such chemicals for industrial agriculture, we certainly don’t *need* them for household gardens. Instead, gardeners can use weed excluding membranes for paths or heavy mulches around beds to eliminate the need spray. The deeper the mulches, the less requirement to spray weeds. Vegetable growers can also be encouraged to keep vegetable beds covered with straw or cover crops.
 - **Use peat-free compost** - The compost in our garden was made at Carraig Dulra permaculture farm and did not contain peat, but most compost sold in Ireland does contain peat. This not only impacts climate change by destroying one of Ireland’s precious carbon sinks, but also has destroys habitat for our native flora and fauna. The best option is to make your own compost out of your garden and kitchen waste. Otherwise, look for peat-free compost if you need to purchase it.

3. **Bees drink too** - Our garden included a small pond to provide clean drinking water for bees and habitat and nesting areas to other for general ecosystem health. The pond had tadpoles and other pond life in it that help maintain a healthy ecosystem. The healthier the soil & water, the healthier the plants, the better the nectar for bees! Putting a small fresh water supply in your garden provides drinking water for both birds and bees.

4. **Hotels for pollinators** - Pollinators don’t just live in hives. Many of them require specialist habitat for over-wintering and breeding. Our garden included the kind of micro-habitats that different bee species require, including long grass, earth hollows, and tunnels. Some of these were made by drilling small holes into logs and others were simply waste cardboard rolled up into pots. Creating winter habitat for bees is a great way to entertain your kids as a wet-weather crafting activity.

5. **Allow a little wildness in your garden.** “Benign neglect”, such as allowing weeds to flower, grass to grow longer and weeds to flower, provides more habitat and food for bees. Weeds like nettles will attract butterflies such as painted ladies, red admirals and peacock butterflies, who rely on the nettles to lay their eggs. So, sit back, relax and congratulate yourself for those dandelions and nettles growing in your garden!

More Information

- [National Pollinator Plan](#) – Highly recommended read with lots of top tips for gardens
- Our Garden Designer, Suzie Cahn, chats to Friends of the Earth Chairperson, Dr. Cara Augustenborg about our Bloom garden in [this 5 minute video](#).
- Our Chairperson chats with Trinity pollinator expert, Prof. Jane Stout, at Bloom 2016 [in this 4 minute video](#).
- [Our 2016 Irish Examiner Opinion piece on glyphosate](#) (RoundUp)
- Suzie Cahn offers permaculture courses at her farm in Wicklow or is available to visit community and school groups. More information at www.dulra.org.