

Nepeta subsessilis

The big buzz in 2020

by Jane Allison, Mayfields Plants



Here at Mayfields Plants, I grow over 200 varieties of plants, all of which are specially chosen for their richness in nectar and pollen. Both are essential to bees for different reasons: pollen is a protein, which is gathered by bees and taken back to the nest/hive to feed the larvae and the queen. While collecting it into their pollen baskets, they spread it from the male reproductive parts of the flower to the female.

The nectar is a carbohydrate. A high energy reward for the bees' efforts. It's there as an attractant. If you can grow plants in your garden which have the 'double whammy' of both in a single flower, then you have a winning situation.

Don't look for the two most nectar-rich plants however: you certainly wouldn't want them in your garden. They are Himalayan Balsam and *Iris pseudocorus*! Very nectar-rich they might be, but the Balsam is a 'banned' plant, and the rhizomes of this iris seem to fatten up and spread overnight! If there was a Latin phrase for these, it would be something like 'thugus maximus'!

I have chosen ten of my favourite (safe) perennials for you to look out for in the 2020 Plant Hunters Fairs' 'season.

It's no accident that my first three belong to the Lamiaceae family. With their distinctive aromatic foliage and two-lipped, claw-like structure (which provides a handy landing pad for the bee!), this family has it all.

Salvia pratensis 'Indigo' and *Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain': these are true hardy perennials, which can survive frost and heavy rains happily in your garden. No need to mollycoddle them by growing them in pots and popping them into your greenhouse for winter protection. It might say 'Plant in well-drained/dryish soil in sun' on the label, but, honestly, they



Salvia verticillata Purple Rain

will put up with climate change challenges very well.

Agastache 'Beelicious Purple': gorgeous large purple flower spikes and the characteristic aniseedy aromatic foliage. It does need a drier spot than the salvias, but it's so rewarding to see it covered in bees throughout its long season.

Nepeta subsessilis: there are plenty of lovely catmints to choose from; some shrubby, some creeping and some which will give your cat a legal 'high'. Nepeta subsessilis is, in my mind, the best of the bunch, and my two tabbies are totally disinterested in it. It has beautiful blue, two-lipped flowers, and will thrive in most soils. It does, however, like the sun.

Digitalis albiflora: I grow over thirty varieties of foxgloves, and this one is my favourite. Its huge, pure white bells give bees plenty of room to buzz around in. When I was a child, I used to love listening to them, and seeing them emerge with dustings of pollen on their furry jackets. Plant it in dampish or well-drained soil in semi shade. It will shoot up to 6' if it likes its situation.

The next two plants are in the Asteraceae family (basically the old Compositae /daisy family), which is one of the most valuable families for high levels of pollen and nectar.

Ligularia (any variety, but 'Zepter' is the best for slug resistance). Plant this in moist soil: bog gardens and pond margins are good. Its golden yellow (sometimes orange) flowers are a magnet for bees.

Aster (Symphyotrichum) novi-anglaie 'Barr's Purple': no border should be without at least one clump of asters. Today's plants have come a long way from the old, mildew-ridden Michaelmas daisies! I always go for the New England asters which rarely get mildew. With a proliferation of pale lilac/purple flowers on 4 ½' stems which don't need staking, 'Barr's Purple' is a valuable food source for late season bees and butterflies.

Echinops 'Blue Globe': if you can actually see the lovely dark blue spherical flowers of this, you will be doing well, because they are usually fully covered with bees jostling for position. Semi shade and a well-drained soil suits best.

Morina longifolia: a strange, almost tropical-looking plant, which is actually as tough as old boots! White and pink flowers on the same stems tell the bees (and you) which flowers have been pollinated and aren't worth visiting. Amazing!

Lythrum 'Robert': the purple loosestrife. It likes a damp soil and a bit of sun and has gorgeous spikes of red flowers over a long late season. Lots of goodies inside this one, thanks to its



Aster (Symphyotrichum) Barr's Purple



Echinops Blue Globe



Morina longifolia

close wildflower heritage.

And finally, a lovely ground cover plant with pollen and nectar- rich, small, white, star-like flowers: *Lychnis flos-cuculi* 'White Robin': grow this in a wild flower area or pop it into a space at the front of the border.

A last word (or two): annuals should be far more than just an afterthought. Many are rich in nectar and flower intensively before setting seed easily and non-invasively. The Apiaceae (formerly the Umbellifer) family provide a huge variety of attractive choices. Here is my pick.

Ammi majus 'Graceland' with its large umbrellas of white florets; *Daucus carota*

'Dara' with its burgundy tops; *Orlaya grandiflora*'s serene white flowers and *Ammi visnaga* 'Green Mist', whose name completely describes its effect. For a vibrant splash of orange, try *Tithonia* 'Torch' (the Mexican sunflower). All these fill gaps beautifully and ensure that there is always something in your borders to keep the bees going.

If you want more to choose from, come and visit my stall at Plant Hunters Fairs, and hope that you get there before the bees do!

Jane Allison, Mayfields Plants



Ammi visnaga Green Mist