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An Herb Garden for Bees. Heather Apple

Did you know that bees are instinctive and highly skilled herbalists? Juliette de Bairacli Levy, the Master Herbalist, has found that bees are wonderful doctors in their own right and know how to dose themselves with herbs to maintain health within the hive.

When I read this, I did not keep bees myself, but was very aware of the many bees that visited my garden. There was a wonderful variety ranging from tiny wild bees, to domestic honey bees, to great fat bumble bees.

I realized that bees were facing incredible challenges with pollution, acid rain and especially the pesticides sprayed on crops and roadside weeds. I decided that I would combine my love of herbs with my love for bees and plant a special medicinal

garden to help the bees cope with our present environment.

I did some research to discover which herbs were especially beneficial to bees. These include aromatic herbs such as lavender, rosemary, thyme, sage, bee balm (bergamot), hyssop, anise-hyssop, basil and marjoram; wild herbs such as motherwort, catnip and purple loosestrife; bitter herbs such as southernwood, wormwood and rue; nectar rich herbs such as clover and alfalfa; all the mints; the borage family; and the rose family. I had already known that bees loved borage and I had planted it among my squashes, cucumbers and melons in order to attract bees for pollination. Now, I planted patches all over the garden, making good use of the plants that had self-seeded from the previous year.

I also carefully noted the blooming periods of all the herbs, flowers, weeds, and flowering shrubs and trees on our property. Over the next couple of years I planted additional varieties to assure that there was an uninterrupted and rich banquet of blossoms from the first crocuses in spring, all through the summer, to the crisp days of autumn when bees are immobilized by the cold and no longer able to work.

I also increased the size of my herb garden. Generally, I harvest my herbs just before they come into flower, or else I harvest the flowers themselves as soon as they open. I planted extras of each variety so that I could allow a number of plants to go to full flower and so supply the bees.

The rewards of this bit of extra effort have been enormous. The population of bees has continued to increase over the years. It is a pleasure to go out to the garden and hear my comfrey patch buzzing as the blossoms are visited by hoards of honey bees and bumble bees.

My Rosa rugosa patch is a special treat for the senses - the sight of masses of pink blossoms, the scent of the warm, sunny air, heavy with sweet rose fragrance and the sound of droves of buzzing bees. Often I have watched bees actually rolling around among the stamens of the rose blossoms. This may serve the utilitarian purpose of gathering extra large amounts of pollen. But to me, it almost seems something more. Imagine being a bee and spending your day climbing inside giant, fragrant flower blossoms to gather golden pollen and sweet nectar. What an ecstatic life!

Juliette de Bairacli Levy praises the healing properties of honey. She says that the test for pure, good and powerful honey is that it should burn the throat of the consumer.

Her own herbal honey was so strong that some people accused her of adding hot pepper. However, she took honey comb straight from the hive to show them that this was its natural flavour.

Flowers are the most vital part of the plant - a glorious expression of its moment of perfection. This is something understood by those who make and use Flower Essences. Imagine a rich honey, gathered on sunny summer days from the blossoms of healing herbs - a rich nectar transformed by golden bees in the heart of their hive. What healing qualities, what a taste and fragrance of summer herbs it can bring to dark winter days!

One can believe that the curative properties of such honey would be great. This could be something that practising herbalists and interested individuals might be interested in experimenting with.

If you don't have your own hive, you could invite a beekeeper to keep a hive on your land in return for a share of the honey.

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But even if you can't have a hive, you can still have the pleasure that comes from watching the bees at work in your garden, and the satisfaction of knowing that you are providing them with healthful herbs that will help them survive in a difficult world.