

Recent Press Release – FlowerScapes Project



Couple's flower-powered business plan to save Britain's hungry bees

Husband-and-wife scientists Steve and Karin Alton are launching a new business to help save Britain's hungry British bees – with a bit of flower power.

The couple's company, Sussex Nature, has launched the FlowerScapes range of bee-friendly flower seed mixes for use by parks departments, councils and developers up and down the country that will beautify our towns and cities, while feeding the bees and other insects that pollinate our plants.

Botanist Steve Alton (who spent 12 years at the Millennium Seed Bank at Kew's Wakehurst Place in Sussex) and his wife Dr Karin Alton, an entomologist who has been researching honey bee decline, came up with their bee-feeding idea after a trip to Germany, where for the past 20 years town gardeners have been helping local communities to beautify their grassy areas using flower seed mixes.

The resulting flowers cover the towns in a glorious wash of colour while offering rich pickings for the bees. It was an idea too good to leave to leave behind.

Karin says: “We have long been concerned about the recent declines in bee populations, and changing use of landscape resulting in less bee forage, but the trigger was holidaying in South Germany and seeing the amazing road verges, roundabouts and spare patches of ground in bloom, and then really putting two and two together.”

The Altons are now working with Lambeth Council and hope to see their pollinator-friendly FlowerScapes seed mixes in four of the London borough’s public parks this summer. Meanwhile, Brighton and Hove City Council have a free sample to trial this year in the city’s much-loved Queens Park.

The idea is catching on with developers too, and Sussex Nature is currently in discussion with several companies who are using BREEAM, the industry code for sustainable construction. It is possible to gain additional points towards BREEAM certification by sowing seed mixes around new developments.

The seed mixes – made up of around 40 colourful varieties of flowering annuals including Californian poppy, cornflower, candytuft and borage, with a flowering time from early June to the first frosts in an average year – are currently designed for commercial use, but the Altons plan to introduce retail packs – along with expert advice on how to use them – in the future.

Karin says: “Some people may worry that we’re just scattering weeds everywhere, but the beauty of this flower mix is that it contains garden varieties that anyone would be happy to see growing, but which bees and other pollinators would be able to feed from too.”

Steve says: “People we have spoken to who have run similar schemes have said that the public reaction has been fantastic. And to the lawn-lovers out there, here’s a fact: the amount of air pollution emitted by a mower operating for one hour is equivalent to the amount of pollution emitted by a car driven for approximately 45 miles. And short amenity grassland is cut as many as 15 times in a year.”

But why the buzz around bee-friendly flowers?

Britain’s honey bees (along with numerous other pollinator species such as bumble bees and butterflies) have been in decline for some time. In the last 100 years, for example, we have lost around three-quarters of our honey bee colonies. This decline has been linked to climate change, disease, pests, insecticides and pollution.

But the Altons believe that one of the biggest problems facing some of our favourite native insects is starvation. We need more flowers, not more hives, if our bees are to weather the perfect storm of disease, pests, hunger and environmental pressure. It’s the pollen and nectar bees gather from flowers that keep them thriving.

Research has shown that the urban environment, with its cultivated gardens and ornamental parks and verges, makes for a much richer foraging ground for bees than the countryside, much of which is given over to flower-denuded crop fields. Much of our countryside is dominated by wind-pollinated crops or ryegrass, and we have lost 97% of our ancient hay meadows.

But even in the biggest cities, life isn't easy for bees. The plight of the honey bee has caught the public imagination, with people clamouring to do their bit, even by taking up bee-keeping on roof tops in urban areas. A spokesperson from the London Beekeepers' Association said, 'In London we have a particular problem with the density of hives which is leading to very low yields and the increased risk of disease and its spread. Raising awareness is key –from getting the public to value their gardens more and plant for pollinators right up to Councils who are increasingly receptive to the idea of converting turfed areas into nectar rich forage. We live in a hugely vibrant city with a surprisingly wildlife savvy population wanting to help and besides, these forage projects look so beautiful and make people feel better. '

According to Pam Hunter, an independent consultant scientist and beekeeper, 'Our beautiful bees, whether they are honey bees, bumble bees or solitary bees, need a plentiful supply of flowers producing nectar and pollen. We can all help, whether we live in the town or the country, have a large or a tiny garden, by providing a range of plants that flower from early spring right up to the first frosts of autumn. '

'The most important animal in the garden is the gardener, though,' says Nick Mann, of conservation product suppliers Habitat Aid, 'and the new FlowerScapes mix is a feast for any gardener's eyes, as well as being designed by experts to help the birds and bees. Not only that, but it's long flowering and easy to maintain. Lovely.'

Notes for Editors

For more information about the FlowerScapes seed mix range, contact Steve or Karin Alton on:

01444 891431 - info@sussexnature.co.uk

Or see <http://www.sussexnature.co.uk>

