



EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Bees are everyone's concern

Teagasc equine specialist **Wendy Conlon** and countryside management specialist **Catherine Keena** explain the importance of bee-friendly farming and simple changes you can make on your farm to help bees

ENJOYING nature on equine farms improves quality of life. Nature or biodiversity in Ireland involves native Irish flora, fauna and the habitats in which they exist.

Biodiversity includes bees. There are 21 bumble bees, 77 solitary bees and one honey bee species in Ireland. Worldwide and in Ireland, biodiversity is in decline. One third of Irish bee species are in danger of extinction. Climate change and environmental degradation are an existing and growing threat to our planet. So what can equine farms do to help?

Strategies such as 'The EU Biodiversity Strategy' and 'Farm to Fork' aim to prioritise climate and environmental challenges and accelerate a transition to sustainable food systems supported by sustainable farming systems. Though equine farming is not principally a food production system here, it is an extensive farming system with the capacity to contribute very positively to environmental protection and intrinsically to the preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity.

Many Irish farms perform very well in respect of the quantity of wildlife habitats they support. There is nonetheless a decrease in the quantity and quality of habitats and species dependant on agricultural landscapes.

Changes in farming practices including intensification, specialisation, and abandonment have led to a decrease in the quantity and quality of habitats and species dependant on traditional agriculture. Conservation of biodiversity and halting the degradation of ecosystem services (e.g. including nutrient cycling in soil, flood prevention, carbon sequestration, carbon storage and pol-



Ireland is home to 77 different bees species \ J Breen



Flowering whitethorn is most important for bees \ C. Keena

ination) are key environmental objectives of the European Union.

Bee friendly farming

The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 highlights that at least 10% of agricultural area should be dedicated to high-diversity landscape features (for example buffer strips, hedges, ponds etc.). Each member state will need to translate this 10% target for its own scenarios and conditions ensuring it is managed through the Common Agricultural Policy and in line with the Farm to Fork Strategy. It is anticipated that financial supports will reward those whose practices align with the strategies mentioned, it is merely a question of how. Sharp reductions in the use of fertilisers (20% at least), pesticides (50%) and antimicrobial animal medicines (50%) are to be targeted by 2030.

It may seem like an over-simplified target to work towards, but bee-friendly farming is a very significant step to preserving biodiversity whilst also addressing the use of fertilisers and pesticides on the farm.

Five simple actions that can be undertaken for bee-friendly farming include:

- Maintain native flowering hedgerows.
- Allow wildflowers to grow around the farm.
- Provide nesting places for wild bees.
- Minimise artificial fertiliser use.
- Reduce pesticide inputs.

Native flowering hedgerows

Hedgerows are full of flora and fauna if well managed. Pollinator friendly plants such as mature and flowering whitethorn (hawthorn) hedges or individual pollinator friendly specimen trees provide food (flowers), shelter, and act as corridors that help pollinators move through the landscape.

Protect native hedgerows you already have on the farm, making sure they are allowed to flower.

A variety of hedgerow types is desirable on every farm. Aim for a diversity of flowering plants, allowing individual thorn trees to mature at irregular intervals. Early in the year bees get pollen from willow, hazel and primroses, thereafter whitethorn, bluebells and dandelions, while later blackberry, woodbine and heather provide sustenance. With its late flowers, ivy is the last source of food at the end of the year.

Wildflowers on the farm

By avoiding over-management of non-farmed areas native wildflowers can flower. Non-farmed areas include farmyards, farm laneways, field margins, watercourse margins, and field corners. Allow a diversity of wildflowers to grow and flower. Fence off from livestock, and cut or graze after flowering.

Do not spray or fertilise. Having flowers available across the seasons helps pollinators survive.

Managing some hay meadows, however small, can be an important action for conserving pollinators, wildflowers and other wildlife.

Nesting places for wild bees

Wild bees have no interest in humans, are not aggressive and pose no threat. Bumblebees nest in long or tussocky grass. Leave long grass along the base of hedgerows, along lanes or in field margins and corners uncut from March to October. Solitary bees nest by making tiny burrows in bare earth (soil, sand, clay and peat). They nest in flat well-drained areas, preferring south/east-facing banks.

In winter create new earth banks by scraping away top layer of soil, though not in areas vulnerable to soil erosion (steep slopes/near watercourses). Bees also make nests in cavities in south-facing walls, masonry, wooden structures, or concrete structures.

Create bee boxes by drilling holes (10cm depth, and 408mm diameter, at height of at least 15-2m) in untreated wood blocks, attaching them to outdoor structures.

Minimise artificial fertiliser use

Only use fertilisers where required and do not spread unnecessarily in awkward corners, turning circles, buffer strips and so on. Ensure accuracy in fertiliser spreading and avoid spreading close to the base of hedges or hedgerow margins. Keep fertilisers away from non-farmed areas to encourage wildflowers. Always try to preserve any areas on the farm that are already naturally flower-rich.

Reduce pesticide inputs

Fungicides, herbicides and insecticides harm pollinators. Avoid spraying close to the base of hedgerows. Avoid spraying non-farmed areas where wildflowers are or could grow.

Where weed control is necessary, pull or use selective spot treatment where possible. Reduce the number and frequency of pesticide applications and spray only in calm weather using low-drift nozzles, and spray in the early morning of late evening when bees are less active.

Reducing pesticide use can save time and money and help prevent pesticide resistance while increasing abundance of naturally beneficial herbage and ensuring more wildflowers are available for pollinators to feed on.

Emergency

Ireland is only the second country in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency. One million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction.

While biodiversity has always evolved, changes in the past 50 years have been more rapid than at any time in human history.

Everyone from farmers to councils, local communities, businesses, schools, and individuals have a part to play in protecting the environment and biodiversity. A key first step is helping bees to survive and thrive.

The quest for neatness should not override ecological considerations. The trend for example of replacing indigenous hedgerows with neat and tidy beech hedges, which may be visually appealing to some, is not good for biodiversity. Allow plants to flower before cutting.

The only plants which are universally undesirable are invasive alien species (Japanese Knotweed) while noxious weeds (ragwort, thistle, docks, male wild hop, common barberry, and wild oats) must be controlled under the Noxious Weeds Act.

Think before acting, and look after the bees.



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