We can all play our part in helping with pollinating planet

Sustainable Strathspey

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MOST of us are aware how important bees are for pollination.

They are essential for 75 per cent of the world's crop species, and 87.5 per cent of the planet's flowering plants.

Many people imagine these are mostly honey (hive) bees, but for instance in the UK there is one species of semi-domesticated honey bee, 24 species of mostly-wild bumblebees and about 250 species of wild "solitary" (non-colonial nesting) bees.

Beetles (the world's first pollinators), wasps, hoverflies and other flies, and butterflies and moths are also generalist or vital specialist pollinators.

Unfortunately there has been a huge decline in insect numbers over the last 50 or so years.

Only older readers will recall buying special "bug remover" to get the sticky remains of insects off cars after a summer drive.

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It is hard to quantify this loss scientifically as few people were counting insects last century but UK Butterfly Transects (a citizen science project) show a decrease in numbers of generalist butterfly species of 46 per cent since 1976, and a whopping 77 per cent loss of habitat-specialist species.

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There is every reason to suppose the situation is the same elsewhere on the planet.

And yes, it does matter. Our staple carbohydrate crops like wheat, barley, and oats are all wind-pollinated, but fruits and vegetables are insect-pollinated.

Tomatoes, for example, must be buzz-pollinated by bumble bees, and raspberries need bee pollination – hence the trade in bumblebee colonies.

Apples and pears need to be cross-pollinated by insects, usually solitary bees. As for chocolate, pollination depends entirely on a few species of midge which breed only in tropical rainforest.

The reasons for the worldwide loss of our little helpers are the usual suspects; habitat loss, pesticides and fertilisers, climate change, competition and diseases from species introductions.

This means anything you can do to help insects is good, and you can start in your garden or window box.

This could include:

- going pesticide and herbicide free (herbicides can poison insects as well as killing their food-plants);
- growing a wide variety of nectar-rich plants that cover the whole season (there are many lists of suitable species published);
- leaving unmown edges and long bits of lawn for wild flowers and nesting, and some bare ground in a dry, sunny place for nest-holes;
- making a bee hotel;
- if you farm leave verges and edges undisturbed and perhaps set aside land to grow wild flowers through initiatives like Speyside Fields for Wildlife;
- lobby the council to reduce un-necessary tidiness and particularly herbicide use;
- take part in one of the citizen science projects on insects, such as the Buzz Club (https://www.thebuzzclub.uk/).

Want to know more? There's lots of information out there, but for the complete, chilling picture read Dave Goulson's latest book Silent Earth, £20.00 hardback or cheaper electronically.

■ Dr Fiona Aungier is a Sustainable Strathspey member

SUPER FLY GUYS: A leafcutter bee and hoverfly on thistle, and female hoverfly with suitors.