



## A Bumble Bee Story

Helen Davis, bumble bee advocate

What's the buzzzzzz... Hopefully one of our native bumble bees! Without bumble bees and other native pollinators foraging within our yards and in nature, wildlife, birds and many plant species would not survive. One early spring I witnessed a queen bumble bee and a pair of chickadees fight over one of my backyard birdhouses. After a few days, the birds gave up, leaving behind one egg. The queen bumble bee, which I identified as a common eastern bumble bee (*Bombus impatiens*), stole the chickadee nest in which to build her small colony.

For a week or so, I watched her come and go, in and out of the house collecting pollen and nectar from early blooming flowers in preparation for her first clutch of six to eight eggs. I learned that she makes a pollen mound where she lays the eggs and places a few tiny wax pots filled with honey around the mound. She will then sit incubating the eggs while sipping from the pots for sustenance until they hatch into larvae in about four days. The larvae consume the pollen ball as the queen begins to forage once again to feed herself and her first brood for about 24 more days until they become adult bumble bees; it's a lot of work!



Once the first brood of adult worker bees emerge and begin their respective duties as house bee or foraging bee, the queen will then remain in the house laying eggs and doling out directions until late summer to early fall, when at the age of about one year, she and any remaining colony members will die. The workers, all female, will live anywhere from 20 to 30 days; some jobs are more difficult and have more perils to overcome. Most males, called drones, emerge later in summer in preparation to mate with the new queens. Males only live about 14 days. They don't work, they just eat, sleep, and mate!

**POLLINATOR  
PARTNERSHIP**

Protect their lives. Preserve ours.



A bumble bee colony's numbers can range from 30 to a few hundred during its brief one-year cycle. Before the queen dies, she hatches new queens which emerge, mate with drones, gorge on fall flowers, and then find a suitable burrow to sleep through the winter months - a time called diapause. They awaken in spring once temperatures reach 40 degrees, looking for dandelions and other early spring flowers from which to gorge and begin their one-year odyssey. This is why it is so extremely important not to use pesticides on dandelions and other spring "weeds" allowing the bee these essential flowers!

Bumble bees have a number of unique skills. They can work 12-hour days, beginning earlier and working later than most bees as they can withstand the cooler temperatures. They have facial recognition skills akin to our own and will come to know you! Their unique "buzz pollination" ability is a sonication skill that enables them to literally beat the pollen out of tubular anthers while they buzz away. They are known for their docile attitude so that some commercial growers are now using them to pollinate inside greenhouses, amiably working alongside humans. If they feel threatened, they will give warnings by lifting one of their legs.



My little backyard colony of not more than 30 at a time seemed to know me, and I was able to come inches from them and their house to observe and take photos. Once temperatures rose in July, I saw a couple of the house workers fanning their little wings as fast as they could at the eaves of the house. I took my hand-held fan and cooled them off. While aiming the fan at the entry hole, the queen backed out of the house to cool off as

she fluffed up her wings! So sweet! I later shaded the house for them with a thin garden blanket.

There are actions we can take at home to help bumble bees and other pollinators. We can provide safe habitat and pesticide-free food. Flowers close to home reduce energy expenditure for a bee. I have placed a "bumble bee house" in my garden that I hope a queen will find next spring. We can provide wintering cavities, piles of leaf debris, and can grow their favorite foods in our gardens. Bumble bees love blue and cannot see red. Favorites include blue salvias, catmint, lemon tree flowers, squash, oregano, jasmine, and sunflowers.

In conclusion, take notice of bumble bees in your garden and provide them and other native pollinators with safe habitat and food. Remember, bumble bees are very docile

**POLLINATOR  
PARTNERSHIP**

Protect their lives. Preserve ours.



and have facial recognition skills. They will work peacefully beside you in your garden. If you see one of their little arms come up, they are asking you to back away a bit. Be kind and consider our little furry native bumble bees; nature needs them!

**POLLINATOR  
PARTNERSHIP**

Protect their lives. Preserve ours.