

## Ivy: Autumn Food for Honey Bees & Flower-Visiting Insects

Ivy is one of the most abundant and widely distributed UK plants. It is also native to most of Europe. Ivy is known for its distinctive leaves and for climbing on trees and walls. Less well known is the fact that ivy flowers, which bloom in autumn, are a major source of nectar and pollen for flower-visiting insects.



Mature ivy on tree trunks



On telephone pole



On walls & buildings



5-lobed & oval leaves



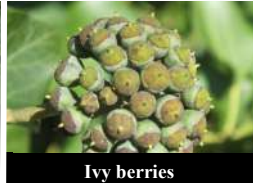
Mass of blooming ivy on wall



Ivy in bloom



Inflorescences in bloom & bud



Ivy berries

Many flowers are large and brightly coloured. Those of ivy are small and green. The only colourful part is the yellow pollen. You may read that bees prefer blue flowers, or some other colour. Although insects may have innate colour preferences, this is not why they visit flowers. They visit to feed. Ivy flowers may be harder to see initially, but if there is nectar and pollen a bee will return. Ivy flowers occur in clusters. An insect may satisfy its needs in a small area.

You can probably find ivy in bloom near where you live. On a sunny autumn day you may be surprised by how many insects visit, both in numbers and variety—ivy nectar is accessible to insects with both long tongues, such as bees and butterflies, and short tongues, such as flies and wasps. Honey bees are usually abundant, collecting both nectar and pollen. Ivy bees, a species that recently colonised Britain from Europe, is abundant in many areas. Bumble bees are usually scarce as most colonies have already completed their annual cycle. Wasps are abundant in some years. A few butterflies, especially the Red Admiral, are often seen. Hover flies are usually abundant. Most species mimic either bees or wasps. If you see an insect that looks like a wasp or honey bee, look closer as it may be a hover fly. Other types of flies can also be abundant, including the Noon fly with its distinctive yellow wing markings.

We should probably appreciate ivy more than we do, as it helps wildlife. Without its abundant autumn flowers, flower-visiting insects would have far less nectar and pollen. Ivy can start blooming as early as August, and in a mild autumn insects forage on ivy as late as December. There is probably no other native British plant species that has such a long and copious bloom.



BEES

Honey bee



Honey bee



Ivy bee female



Male (no pollen, longer antennae)



HOVER FLIES

Batman hover fly *Myathropa florea*



Honey bee mimic *Eristalis tenax*



Hornet mimic *Volucella zonaria*



Pied hoverfly *Volucella pellucens*



BUTTERFLIES

Comma



Red Admiral



Painted Lady



Speckled Wood



WASPS

Worker common wasp



OTHER FLIES

Noon fly



Greenbottle



Bluebottle

### Did You Know?

- \* LASI research found that 90% of the pollen collected by honey bees colonies in autumn was from ivy. But most worker bees were actually collecting nectar. Garbuzov & Ratnieks 2013. *Insect Conservation & Diversity*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/icad.12033>
- \* Ivy flowers are so abundant that bee hives sometimes make a crop of ivy honey in autumn. Also needed is warm and sunny weather suitable for bee foraging.
- \* Ivy is a food plant of several insect species, including holly blue butterfly larvae.
- \* Ivy berries are winter food for birds, and ivy also provides nest sites for birds.
- \* Ivy is not a parasite. It climbs trees for support only. It also climbs walls.
- \* Ivy has 2 kinds of leaves. The 5-lobed leaves are from immature ivy. When the plant has climbed into the sun and become mature, oval-shaped leaves are produced.
- \* Ivy flowers occur on mature, woody, ivy with oval leaves growing in a sunny location.
- \* Ivy flowers have a strong odour which is produced even by unopened flowers. In early autumn you may see bees exploring patches of unopened flowers. They have probably fed on open flowers and have learned to associate the ivy smell with food.

**Funding & How You May Help** LASI does research and outreach to help honey bees. To help LASI please go to: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/lasi/getinvolved>



LASI does research and on honey bees & social insects, trains students, & provides outreach. This Information Sheet was written by Prof. Francis Ratnieks © 2018 & sponsored by the Eva Crane Trust. [www.sussex.ac.uk/lasi](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/lasi) F.Ratnieks@Sussex.ac.uk <https://www.youtube.com/user/LASIBeeResearch>

