

THE BEES WILL THANK YOU IF YOU PLANT HEATHERS

Have you ever watched the bees working the heathers on a nice sunny day in February? It is a wonderful sight at this time of the year. One year at the Cobble Hill Fall Fair, I explained to a bee keeper where my garden was situated and that I had many heather plants. His reply was “I thought there was heather in my honey – my hives were near your garden a few years ago. I also believe that my winter flowering heathers help to feed the hummingbirds during the winter.

Heathers are workhorse plants that add much interest to the garden and are relatively resistant to deer. Many varieties change their foliage to very bright colours during the winter. As you drive around at the moment you will notice bright splashes of reds and oranges in several gardens. Foliage colour ranges from greens to yellow to bronze and many shades in between. As well, there are several varieties that develop cream, red, yellow or pink spring tips. Depending on the varieties that we plant, we can have flowers from January to December, again with a wide range of colour. Also, don't forget that heathers vary widely in their height and width which gives more interest to the garden. They can range in height from a low of six inches to a high of about five feet.

You might want to think about what else you can plant in your garden to add interest and attract bees, birds and butterflies. I will give you an idea of just some of the plants that I grow – keeping in mind that I have many deer and find that these plants do not appear to be attractive to them – at least in my garden. These plants are also relatively low maintenance.

Pieris japonica comes out in flower early in the year. Many of you will know it as the Lily-of-the-Valley bush. Today there are many hybrids and some of the ones that I like are “Flamingo” with dark red buds and “Little Heath” with slightly variegated leaves.

Don't forget the *Rhodendron*. These plants also vary widely in foliage & flower colour and size. There is such a wide variety of hybrids that one will be able to find the hybrid with just the right size and colour to suit your needs.

Styrax japonicus is a graceful small deciduous tree that bears bell-shaped flowers in the late spring. Look for a smaller hybrid such as “Pink Chimes”.

To give you a start with the heather and heaths in your garden, plan to attend the annual Vancouver Island Heather Society's spring sale which will take place on Saturday March 29 at the Cobble Hill Farmer's Institute Hall. The sale will begin at 10:00 AM and last until noon or until sold out. Experienced buyers will advise you that it is essential to get to the hall prior to the sale starting in order to get the best selection. We always have unusual varieties on hand. In addition, starter kits consisting of ten plants and a planting diagram will be available. Members of the Society will be on hand to help you make your choices.

Elaine Scott. Vancouver Island Heather Society.