

Trees for bees, butterflies and other insects in small gardens

UK native species

A useful guideline offered by HabitatAid, an environmental retailer of trees, wildflowers and other related products, states that 'As a rule of thumb the longer a tree or shrub has been here, the more species are dependent on it - which is why native British trees are so important in supporting biodiversity in the UK'. <https://www.habitataid.co.uk/pages/about-us>

Species	Height, if fully grown	Pros	Cons	Other comments
Alder Buckthorn	6m if not pruned but can be maintained quite happily at 1-2m.	Caterpillar foodplant of Brimstone butterfly; has small flowers in spring providing nectar and pollen for bees and other insects; berries in autumn provide food for birds; very tolerant of most conditions including damp acid soils and easy to grow; very cheap to buy	Berries are not fit for human consumption (purgative); more a shrub and/or for hedgerows than a 'speciment tree'	Can be pruned regularly and maintained as a shrub; factsheet available from DB
Blackthorn	6m if not pruned but can be maintained quite happily at 1-2m.	Caterpillar foodplant of Brown Hairstreak butterfly (UK Priority Species); has beautiful white flowers in spring providing nectar and pollen for bees and other insects; sloes in autumn provide food for birds or for making sloe gin!; very tolerant of most conditions including damp acid soils and easy to grow; very cheap to buy	Sharp spines; can be invasive but easily kept in check if grown in grass by mowing around the tree; more a shrub and/or for hedgerows than a 'speciment tree'	Can be pruned regularly and maintained as a shrub which also maintains its attractiveness as foodplant for Brown Hairstreak caterpillars which like younger growth
Hawthorn	15m if not pruned but can be maintained quite happily at 2m+.	Excellent tree for many species of insect, maybe as many as 300 species!; has beautiful white, occasionally pink, flowers in spring providing nectar and pollen for bees and other insects; berries in autumn provide food for birds; very tolerant of most conditions including damp acid soils and easy to grow; very cheap to buy	Has thorns	Can be pruned regularly and maintained as a small tree; often used for hedging
Hornbeam	30m if not coppiced or pollarded - can live for c300 years!	Deciduous but keeps its leaves through winter, providing shelter, roosting and foraging opportunities for birds and small mammals; food plant for caterpillars of various moths; Birds and small mammals eat the seeds in autumn; grows well in heavy soils of West Sussex; very cheap to buy.	Not a notable source of nectar or pollen	Can be coppiced/pollarded and maintained as a small tree; often used for hedging

Goat Willow (aka Pussy Willow)	10m if not coppiced or pollarded - can live for c300 years!	Goat willow foodplant for caterpillars of many moths and the purple emperor butterfly. Catkins provide early source of pollen and nectar for bees and other insects, and birds feed on caterpillars and insects living on the Willow; grows well in heavy soils of West Sussex; very cheap to buy.	Not a classic 'tree shape'	Can be coppiced/pollarded and maintained as a small tree
Buddleia (butterfly bush)	3m+ but better shape and vigour if pruned hard in spring	Well known nectar source for butterflies and other insects; wide range of colours depending on variety selected; relatively inexpensive; easy to grow but maybe not on very damp or badly drained ground	More a large shrub than a tree; not native to UK	
Crab apple	10m but can be pruned - can live for 100 years	Prolific and beautiful spring blossom, provides nectar and pollen for bees and other insects; leaves provide food for many species of caterpillar; fruit in autumn for birds, especially thrushes, and mammals; can be used to make crab apple jelly; 'pollination partner' for other fruit trees	Susceptible to fungal infections	There are many varieties of ornamental crab apple, providing a wide range of different coloured fruits, and stunning blossom in spring
Silver Birch (and other varieties of birch)	Can grow to 30m	Birch has a light, open canopy which allows grasses, mosses, wood anemones, bluebells, wood sorrel, violets, etc. to grow in its light shade; provides food and habitat for 300+ insect species; can be associated with some interesting fungi species; used by hole-nesting birds and provides seeds which are eaten by siskins, greenfinches and redpolls; inexpensive to buy	Less valuable for its flowers, pollen and nectar than other species listed	
Elm (new Dutch Elm disease resistant cultivars)	30m - can live for c300 years!	Many birds and some small mammals eat elm seeds and the leaves provide food for the caterpillars of many moths. Important foodplant for caterpillar of the white-letter hairstreak butterfly, a UK Priority species	More suited to very large gardens or growing in countryside hedgerows; some varieties susceptible to Dutch Elm Disease but new varieties may be OK; cultivars are expensive	Take specialist advice on DED resistant cultivars

Hazel	12m but better if coppiced every few years	Leaves provide food for the caterpillars of many moths; nuts eaten by mammals (incl. dormice), birds (and, if you are lucky, by you); cut poles can be used for runner beans, etc.; flowers provide some early pollen for bees; trunks can support mosses and liverworts; inexpensive to buy; easy to grow and well suited to our heavy soils		
Cultivated fruit trees e.g. apples, pears, plums	Various - see comment	Fruit, beautiful flowers in spring; source of nectar and pollen; can be relatively inexpensive; various cultivars offer a range of sizes to suit most positions/gardens	Not suited to damp, waterlogged ground; some/most varieties need to be grown with another variety to achieve pollination to produce fruit	Depending on the rootstock chosen trees, can grow from less than 1m to 10m
Flowering currant	2-3m	Excellent early season nectar for bees; easy to grow and to keep to a manageable size by pruning. relatively inexpensive.		Large shrub rather than tree.
Other sources of information	https://www.capitalgardens.co.uk/blog/best-small-trees-for-bees/ https://www.urbanbees.co.uk/trees/trees.htm			