**Bee friendly pest control**

**Ben Raskin - 22 February 2013**

The last couple of weeks have seen some good news for bees. First was the [news that some garden centres were withdrawing bug killers that contained the neonciotinoid imidacloprid](http://www.soilassociation.org/news/newsstory/articleid/4910/retailers-remove-products-containing-neonicotinoids). And then came a proposal from the European Commission to completely suspend the use of three neonicotinoids – imidiacloprid, thiamethoxam and clothianidin – that have been found to damage bees.

Encouraging as this news is, there are another two types of neonicotinoid – acetamiprid and thiacloprid – found in [common gardening products](http://www.soilassociation.org/wildlife/bees/householdpesticides), which are aimed at controlling five pests of the garden: aphid, whitefly, vine weevil, thrips and butterflies. And these chemicals also seem to pose a direct threat to bees.

Hopefully there will be more progress on getting all neonicotinoids banned, but in the meantime the obvious thing to do is for people to stop using them. This still leaves the problem for gardeners as to how to keep pests at bay. So, if you, or anyone you know, is currently using bug sprays with neonicotinoids in here are our top five tips for controlling pests while staying on the good side of our furry flying friends.

1. Don’t panic! Chances are, if you have a low level of pests in your garden it’s keeping the predators happy by providing them with a meal or two. Pests are essential to your garden in order to maintain the balance of keeping other animals alive - without them, those animals might not survive. Of course, there is a difference between seeing one cabbage white butterfly and losing your entire crop of kale. Each pest and crop will present you with a different situation and there may be a point where you need to take action to save your plants.
2. Swap the harmful chemicals for bee friendly biological replacements such as nematodes for vine weevil or BT (Bacillus thuringiensis) for cabbage whites. Biological replacements should be an effective way to keep these specific pests at bay.
3. If you feel that biological replacements aren’t doing the job, chemical options such as soft soap can be used. Unlike biological controls these are not targeted at a particular pest - but they can be good at quickly reducing an infestation. You can then go in with the biological replacement afterwards to keep the numbers down for the rest of the season.
4. Cultural changes such as netting and hoovering (using little hoovers that you might use to clean your car) could be the answer. These options are good because they have no impact on the plant at all, other than to reducing the number of pests nibbling away.
5. For the more hardcore gardeners out there, consider alternative systems that build a diverse and balanced ecosystem where pests are under control. Getting a wide range of habitats into your garden is the best way to encourage a wide range of predators. This also includes having access to fresh water and shelter. Some areas of permanent planting – whether trees or perennial plants, will help to contribute to your garden habitat. And last, but by no means least, don’t forget to plant some bee-friendly flowers to keep the pollinators happy!