



Common Mullein and Wild Bumblebees

On a bright summer afternoon, spires of mullein stand straight among long grasses in an overlooked city lot. Protected in a bower of buttery bloom, a bumblebee sleeps, held fast between stamen and pistils.

Mullein has a biennial life cycle, starting as a rosette of fuzzy leaves. In its second year, the rosette will grow as space and nutrients allow, up to several feet across, before a flowering spike emerges. Each spike can support several spires spiraled with buds, shooting up to ten feet high. The buds bloom in successive waves up the spire, with several flowers open at a time.

Mullein plants were introduced to the region by English settlers in the 1700s, and they have spread widely as the seeds can wait for years to germinate and then grow easily in disturbed soil. In the past, the rigid dried stalks were used as bases for torches, and the leaves used as herbal medicine.

How do bees sleep?

The queen bumblebees will sleep in their colonies, but the male bumblebees sleep "rough." You can look for bumblebees sleeping in flowers on cooler afternoons or longer days! There are at least 10 potential bumblebee species that could be sleeping in a mullein flower in the Narragansett bay region.

Unlike honey bees, wild bumble bees use a buzz pollination technique to shake large grains of pollen free. This is beneficial for plants such as blueberries and tomatoes whose flowers have pollen reserves that can only be released with this vibration.

