Plant common name: **Rosebay Willowherb**

Latin name: *Chamerion angustifolium*

Common family name: Willow Herb

Scientific family name: **Onagraceae**

Plant height: up to 2.5m

Flowering period: July – September

Provides: a good source of late pollen and nectar. It is number 8 in the Kirk and Howes’ top ten plant list for honey bees (4).

Utilised by: honey bees, bumble bees such as: short- tongued buff-tailed; white-tailed; and common carder bee. Solitary mining bees also visit.

Honey: Yes, but I leave it all for my bees to store as it is the last that they will get for the season alongside, Himalayan balsam, ragwort and ivy. The honey is described as water white but with good density and lacking in a distinct flavour. Since is sets with fine crystals is useful for blending or “seeding” with other honeys.

**Rosebay Willowherb**

Rosebay willowherb is not a new comer to the UK and its spikes of purple reddish flowers were first described in 1597 by Gerard as: “brave flours of great beauty.”

Rosebay willowherb comes from a large family with many species and similar survival strategies. It is described as a pioneer plant growing where land has been cleared, as in forestry, or by bombing as in the last war. It regenerates quickly after fires hence the moniker, fireweed.

The pollination mechanism is by the far the most interesting of any plant that I know. Protandry is practiced whereby the male matures first. Male flower parts mature first ensuring cross-pollination. What happens is, the male flower opens at the bottom of the flower spike but, because there are no receptive female flowers on the plant, they can only donate pollen which is transferred by visiting pollinators to other plants thus ensuring genetic diversity and reduction on inbreeding amongst this species. This strategy ensures that willowherb plants remain strong.

However, the clever plan is not complete and, as the lower flower matures, the anthers shrivel whilst the stigmas mature thus making the flower effectively female.

The female flowers lower down the plant are the most nectar rich of all and are visited first by insects. Pollinators work their way up the flower spikes collecting pollen and taking it to other plants. However, there is an insurance policy at work here whereby sometimes there are both mature male and female flowers on the same plant and so self-pollination will also occur.

The fruits are packed in fluffy downy material once used in Scotland for stuffing mattresses. This special packaging ensures easy spread of the species by the wind. Although this plant thrives and proliferates easily it is quickly overshadowed when forests regenerate and so does not maintain its dominance for long.

The purple/reddish flowers are 20-30mm in long tapered racems which are spike-like inflorescences where the individual flowers are visibly stalked. The alternate lanceolate leaves are slightly toothed.

There has not been much medical use made of willowherb in the past, however modern herbalism may use it to treat asthma. Tea made from the dried leaves has a soporific effect and may be enjoyed at bed time.

**Pollen** under the microscope (x 600 magnification)

Colour: vivid blue/green

Shape: triangular

Size: large 50-100 µm

Exine features: medium with no rods

Surface: indefinite

Number of apertures: 3

Aperture Type: pores

Other features: Strands of viscous threads seen hanging off grains