

# Bee All You Can Bee?

By Jane Harris, Middletown GC, Zone II



**Above:** Thought to be the source of the common name bumblebee, Beatrix Potter created Babbitty Bumble for *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*. Illustration via Wikimedia Commons

**B**umblebees might be the Rodney Dangerfields of the insect world. Think about it: their very name conjures up bumbling! As part of the *Hymenoptera* order, bees are cousins to ants, wasps, and sawflies. Each of those cousins has a distinct profile: ants are pesky, wasps are mean, sawflies are creepy. Bees, on the other hand, can be a lot of different things—after all, there are 20,000 known species, and over 3,600 of them are native to North America. One of the most interesting native bee species is the bumblebee.

Bumblebees belong to the genus *Bombus* (Latin for booming, buzzing, or humming) and were historically known as the humblebee. It may have been Beatrix Potter who dubbed them the bumblebee when a bee named Babbitty Bumble appeared in *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*, published in

1910. Although gardeners often think of non-native honeybees when they think about pollination, bumblebees, with their striped fuzz and their gentle buzz, are more efficient than honeybees at pollinating: their ability to vibrate allows them to shake pollen loose from certain flowers, such as the tomato's. Like honeybees, bumblebees have specialized baskets for holding pollen on their rear pair of legs. Researchers have counted 3,000 pollen grains stuck together in balls carried in those baskets.

Recently, honeybees have been in the news because of colony collapse disorder, the sudden death of entire honeybee colonies, which has signaled peril to our food supply. Industrial beekeepers began reporting bee losses in the millions, starting around 2006 and continuing today. In an effort to reverse this decline, home beekeeping

**Right:** Only honeybees perform “bearding,” leaving the hive during hot weather to allow the hive to cool down. Photo by Gail Hamsher

