

GARDENING FOR WILDLIFE

The overall strategy when gardening for wildlife should be to maximise diversity, which means maximising types of habitat within the garden, and ensuring that they are all free from the effects of chemicals, noise and other forms of disturbance. A garden should be an extension of local countryside. Establishing habitats requires a knowledge of the ecological roles of those organisms likely to populate the garden and which will form parts of food chains. The more native species you have, especially trees, shrubs, and wild flowers, the more your garden will attract and retain wildlife. Alien species and horticultural varieties are very poor components of a habitat suitable for our wildlife. Also, if your garden has its soil covered by paving, asphalt, concrete, decking or some other material there is little chance of it attracting wildlife. Gardens that are mainly lawn are also poor habitat, and high maintenance into the bargain. The more horticultural varieties you have the more maintenance your garden will need. A garden full of native species and no grass is very low maintenance indeed, and if you resist the temptation to keep it tidy you will have an ideal basis for a wildlife garden. For a few species, such as House Sparrows, House Martins, Swifts, and House Mice, houses and gardens are a prime location, but many more will be happy to share our gardens if we have what they need and let them be when they arrive. Always remember the natural gardener's motto: **Keep Britain Untidy**.

Never persecute predators in your garden, as they have a vital role in maintaining food chains and a healthy ecosystem. As populations of small birds decline larger birds like crows have moved into gardens, but crows are not responsible for the decline, they are simply taking advantage of increased opportunities and reduced competition for food.

Gardening for Birds

Planting natural food

Many birds are seasonal omnivores, eating both invertebrates and seeds/nuts/fruits when available. Tits and finches, for example, eat mainly plant food in autumn and winter, when there are few invertebrates around, but more animal food in spring and summer. Berried plants are very important for winter thrushes, both resident, like mistle thrushes, and visitors, like redwings and fieldfares. Small native trees can be planted to provide variety of food and cover, such as wild cherry, bird cherry, hawthorn, holly, blackthorn, whitebeam, dogwood, rowan, elder, service tree, crab apple, wild pear, wild plum, bullace, medlar, quince, field maple, hazel, and berried native shrubs including gooseberries and currants. Teasels are very good winter seed bearers, especially for goldfinches. Male goldfinches have narrower bills than females so are more adept at picking the seeds out. Alder cones will attract goldfinches too, and also siskins and redpolls.

Planting food shrubs in thickets will benefit social birds like sparrows, finches and warblers, and also provide nesting places. Bramble and nettles are popular, notably with blackcaps and other warblers, and hawthorn scrub is favoured by finches. Avoid autumn pruning when there are still seeds, nuts, and fruits on the branches, and don't be in a hurry to clear dead stems retaining seeds. Once the seeds have been taken the stems may be useful for spring nesting material. Autumn debris that is not wanted for nesting should be left to slowly decay.

Garden Feeders

These are deservedly popular, but do need to be kept clean and topped up. Inspect after a wet period and throw away any contents that are affected by mildew. Have several feeders to attract different birds.

Niger seeds are favoured by goldfinches, redpolls and siskins

Black sunflower seeds are popular with tits and greenfinches

Mixed seeds attract normally insectivorous birds like robins as well as seed-eaters like finches

Peanuts are favourites with tits and long-tailed tits

Do not use seed mixtures containing a high proportion of cereal grains, as these swell in the stomachs of small birds.

Fresh coconut halves will attract long-tailed tits and starlings

Do not use desiccated coconut as this will cause dehydration

Hanging logs with inserted seeds and fat will attract tits and sparrows.

Garden Nest Boxes

There is lots of information on-line about how to construct your own nest boxes. Commercially produced nest boxes are often cheaply constructed from timber that is not weatherproof. Boxes you make yourself from durable materials will last much longer. Open-fronted nest boxes are less popular nowadays because of raiding by squirrels, crows, and other predators that have moved into gardens in recent years, but were used by robins, pied wagtails, spotted flycatchers, chaffinches, and blackbirds.

Hole-fronted nest boxes are more secure, but must be chosen with care so that the hole is not too large, although raiders like squirrels and great spotted woodpeckers will try to enlarge the hole.

25 mm diameter is the right size for blue tits, coal tits, and marsh tits

28 great tits, tree sparrows, and pied flycatchers

32 house sparrows and nuthatches

45 starlings

Owls (Tawny, Barn, and Little) will use appropriately designed nest boxes, as will kestrels, but the only one of these likely to nest in an urban area is the Tawny Owl.

For more information on gardening for birds see the RSPB website: www.rspb.org.uk

Gardening for Butterflies and Moths

The garden will need nectar sources for adults, covering the period from March until November, and food plants for the caterpillars. The latter must be native species, and the former preferably. A well-stocked garden in the south of England could attract up to 15 species of butterfly and up to 400 species of moth. Moth caterpillars are themselves a very important food source for young birds, hedgehogs, frogs, toads, and parasitic wasps, and adult moths are a very important food for bats.

Butterflies like to bask in the sun, so place large stones in sunny positions. Log piles for hibernation would also be useful, as would protection from strong winds, which will discourage flight. An untidy site will provide hiding places for small moths. A wildflower meadow is a better alternative than a herbaceous border, but both are valuable. Deadhead the flowering stems to prolong flowering, and keep well watered. Gardens with large, regularly mowed lawns are unlikely to attract butterflies. Speckled Wood butterflies breed well in wooded gardens.

The best flowers for nectar feeding are those of single-flowered plants, because the nectar may be difficult to reach in double or multi-petalled flowers. Members of the Daisy and Umbellifer families are good, the former includes thistles, knapweeds, and hemp agrimony. Try to cover all seasons, such as fruit trees and shrubs in the spring, borage, cornflower, foxglove, daisy and umbellifer families in the summer, bistort and ivy in the autumn, honeysuckle in the winter. Plant night-scented flowers, such as night-scented stock, evening primrose, honeysuckle, for crepuscular moths. Not all moths drink nectar, but whereas many adult butterflies and moths will take nectar from a variety of flowers, caterpillars are often species specific (the Adonis Blue caterpillar, for example, only feeds on Horseshoe Vetch) or family specific (the Essex Skipper caterpillar will feed on several grass species).

For detailed advice go to the Butterfly Conservation website: butterfly-conservation.org

Gardening for Bees

Provision for bees in every possible green space must now be regarded as urgent, as bee populations have fallen dramatically. 97% of our wildflower meadows have been lost since 1930, plus many hedgerows and field margins. 80% of our wildflowers depend on insect pollination, of which the most important insects are the bees. A bee-friendly garden will need both nectar-rich and pollen-rich flowers, both long and short grass, a source of water, and no use of chemicals. As with butterflies and moths, single-flowered native plant species are the best.

There are many types of bee, each with specific requirements. Leaf-cutter bees are not too fussy, and evidence of them is easy to find. Loose mortar is used by masonry bees, old mouse holes by bumblebees, and tree holes by solitary bees, so don't be in a hurry to repair or block up. Solitary bees will also take to constructed nest sites. The more untidy you are the more likely you are to have a diverse selection of bee species. Don't forget also that wasps are important predators in the garden; keep your distance and they won't bother you. Hornets are large, but actually the most docile of the wasps. Their reputation for alleged ferocity is totally unwarranted.

For detailed advice go to the website: wildaboutgardens.org.uk

For a list of nectar- and pollen-rich flowers go to the website: rhs.org.uk/perfectforpollinators, but chose only the native plants from the list.

Gardening for Bats

Bats are prolific consumers of insects, and one individual may eat up to 3000 on a summer's night. These most useful of mammals need diurnal roosting sites and winter hibernating places. For several weeks in the summer females use a maternity roost to give birth and look after their young for the first 3 to 4 weeks of their lives. Do not disturb if you come across one. In the winter bats may wake up and spend some time feeding, but their active period is from March/April until November/December.

Gardens that have what bees, butterflies and moths want will also be attractive to bats. This includes gardens with ponds and aquatic plants, as mayflies are good prey for bats, gardens with herbs and aromatic flowers, and with night-scented flowers. Also, gardens with trees, shrubs, hedges, climbing plants, long grass, and compost heaps, encourage concentrations of insects, and therefore bats. To get bats regularly outside lighting should be absent or controlled; powerful security lights deter bats.

Bat boxes must be carefully constructed with regard to the size of the entrance and design of the interior, and carefully sited so that there is a clear approach unobstructed by branches. Wood should be rough cut (so roosting bats can cling to it), untreated with chemicals, and the entrance slit must be within the range 15-20 mm. Do not open or otherwise disturb the box once it is in position. In urban areas only the Common and Soprano Pipistrelles are likely to take an interest in bat boxes. If you use a bat detector to try and identify bats in an urban area remember that motor vehicles and electrical equipment can interfere with your detector and create false readings.

Bats are protected by law and cannot be disturbed nor handled without a licence. Persecution may lead to prosecution. Remember that if we didn't have bats you would be far more severely troubled by clouds of biting insects than you are now.

More information can be found on the Bat Conservation Trust website: bats.org.uk

Gardening for Hedgehogs

Hedgehogs are habitual ramblers, who will snuffle and grunt their way over a range of 10-20 hectares, covering between one and two kilometres per night. It is vital, therefore, that they have entrances and exits linking neighbouring gardens, something that can be negotiated between neighbours. Cutting a

hole at the bottom of a fence panel 5"x5" (13 cm x 13 cm) will help if the whole of your boundary is fenced.

Their main diet consists of earthworms, slugs, beetles, and caterpillars, and these will be in abundance in an untidy garden with log piles, leaf piles, uncleared branches, twigs and leaves, and a compost heap. Some of these may be chosen for hibernation, from October/November until March/April, so bonfires should not be lit, nor strimming done, because of the danger to hibernating hogs and nests of hoglets. Never use slug pellets. Hedgehogs are good swimmers, and will drink from ponds, but do ensure that a ramp is provided for them to scramble out if necessary.

For more advice go to the website: wildaboutgardens.org.uk

Gardening for Moles

No special preparation is needed. If they are in the vicinity they will find your garden, improve the soil no end, and feed voraciously on the invertebrates you would prefer to be under control. Like bats, moles are much maligned by those who value lawns above wildlife, but they are hugely beneficial little mammals to those who learn to live with them. Instead of cursing your talpine visitor, plot the appearance of molehills and learn about their movements. Like rats, they are indefatigable, highly intelligent, have super senses, and all attempts to exterminate them will fail, and may lead to prosecution as it will with bats.

Gardening for Earthworms

The aeration, texture, and overall quality of soil is improved enormously by providing good conditions for earthworms. Ideally, remove all artificial soil coverings like paving, concrete, asphalt, and decking. To conserve soil moisture work in leaf mould, manure, rotted down vegetable parings, and peat-free compost. Let leaves and twigs stay where they drop, and let plants die down naturally at the end of their season. Scatter prunings on the ground to decompose. No chemicals of any kind should be used. Worms are valuable food for many garden visitors, so a good population will benefit both your soil and the garden's biodiversity.

For more advice go to the website: wildaboutgardens.org.uk

Gardening for Amphibians

While amphibians need water to breed, adult amphibians are largely terrestrial, but do need damp, shady places to conserve body moisture, escape from the hot sun, and to shelter from predators. They do not drink but absorb water through their soft, porous skins, so a shallow source of water is valuable to help them avoid desiccation. They keep cool and moist by adopting a nocturnal lifestyle, but go into a torpor during winter. Safe refuges are essential, such as log piles or a 'cave' built from large stones. They eat a variety of invertebrates. If you have dogs or cats remember that toads defend themselves by releasing a pungent skin secretion that is toxic. If you need to handle toads then wear gloves.

Gardening for Reptiles

Unlike amphibians, reptiles are not prone to desiccation because of their layer of scales, and will happily bask in the sun, although basking sites should be near cover. Slow Worms and Grass Snakes will go under a piece of old carpet or corrugated iron in a sunny spot and absorb the warmth. Slow Worms are the most usual reptilian garden visitor, and their ideal garden will have long grass, plenty of uncollected litter, a compost heap, log piles for winter refuge and hibernation, and a source of water. Grass Snakes will lay eggs in compost heaps, and swim in ponds, as they are the only British reptile that hunts in water as well as on land.

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