

THE CASE FOR NATURAL GARDENING WITH NATIVE SPECIES

The principal components of Sussex terrestrial habitats are native plants, both flowering and non-flowering, but not including conifers, which are native to northern Britain only, and only comprise three of the thirty three native British tree species (list of native trees and shrubs attached). For several generations garden owners have been in the habit of planting alien (foreign) species and horticultural varieties of trees, shrubs, bulbs, and herbaceous flowers, instead of natives, urged on by those with a vested interest in changing the natural environment, such as radio and television gardening programmes, garden centres, local and national shows, and the Royal Horticultural Society. Their wares are often very beautiful, but we cannot afford such luxuries any longer, because we are in the middle of a wildlife extinction crisis.

Native species under threat, both animal and plant, need every patch of suitable unpolluted habitat they can find, and the huge number of gardens in Britain, both large and small, is now vital to help our beleaguered wildlife to survive. It behoves us therefore to endeavour to make our gardens as much like countryside as possible, by beginning the process of planting only native species from now on, either afresh or by replacing alien and horticultural varieties by native, and managing the gardens so those natives can thrive. Get the plants right, and the animals will find the garden.

Native species have evolved together in mutual dependency. A foreign plant may provide perching and nesting places for birds, for example, but little else. A native plant will be food for native microorganisms and animals, especially invertebrates, and will also provide medicinal extracts, and an environment to socialise in and to educate the young. Parents, for example, mammals and birds, can only pass on their knowledge of food and medicines to their offspring if those native plants are there. An all native environment is healthy and sustaining, whereas an alien environment creates problems for wildlife and gardeners alike. Alien plants, including grass, are high maintenance, of little benefit to wildlife unfamiliar with their properties, and can become invasive because the checks and balances provided by their usual herbivores are not present. Of even higher maintenance is the 'paving and prairie' garden, consisting of nothing but paving/concrete/asphalt/decking and grass. This type of garden looks simple and untroubling, but is in fact highly destructive to the natural environment, reducing drainage, light penetration, soil stratification, and connectivity of habitats.

Native ecosystems need no chemicals because natural checks and balances are already there, even if gardeners are sometimes impatient with them, or unaware of them. No digging is required, no pruning or shaping, no tidying around them, and no watering or feeding except in extreme conditions. They are best left undisturbed, and when established maintenance will be virtually zero. Close planting ensures that there will be no grass or other invasive plants, and this can be augmented by the encouragement of native ground-cover plants, of which the dog's-tooth violet is the champion, but there are many other Sussex natives that are effective and easily controllable. The concept of 'weeding' does not apply to natural gardens. 'Weeds' and 'pests' are simply native species that are smarter than the gardener.

The success of natural gardening with native species depends on the establishment of food chains, which in turn leads to the greatest possible biodiversity. Aliens are not part of these food chains, which have their origins millions of years ago. Microorganisms, invertebrates, non-flowering plants like mosses, liverworts, and ferns (but not conifers in Sussex), and our vast panoply of fungi, are vital elements, as are the flowering plants themselves. Rotting down and recycling of nutrients is both quicker and more effective in native ecosystems because all the components have evolved together in self-perpetuating natural cycles. Without these cycles of growth and decay the larger animals on the ends of each contributing food chain will not survive. In a well-planned natural garden they will survive, and our patchwork of urban gardens will become a vital reservoir for our endangered, hard-pressed wildlife.