



# wildlife gardening



## what is it?

Gardening for wildlife is not the same as letting your garden go wild - it's about using space to create habitat and grow plants that benefit and encourage it. Your garden will still need tending and maintaining, just in a different way. It doesn't have to mean completely redesigning what you already have. Small areas of grass left to grow longer, hedge-bottoms with protective leaves and vegetation, herbaceous borders left untrimmed over winter – these things can provide valuable habitat. Even if you only have a small yard space or balcony, container gardens and bird feeders can attract a surprising amount of visitors.

In the 1940s and 50s, wildlife and gardens went hand in hand. However, the 60s the introduction of pesticides and herbicides instantly made gardens more sterile, and nature became something that happened in the countryside. This 'fashion' continued for a couple of decades, until naturalist and TV presenter Chris Baines wrote *How To Make A Wildlife Garden* in 1985, which was hugely popular and influential - and still is. Suddenly wildlife gardening was legitimate - a proper subject. Over the years it has gained in popularity and now the idea of encouraging nature is widespread, especially with the rise of popular programmes like Springwatch.

## what are the benefits?

Wildlife gardens are beautiful and infinitely fascinating, providing interest all year round. There's lots of evidence to show humans need a connection to nature and the seasons for well-being, so having wildlife around enhances quality of life. And having nature close at hand for children is invaluable education; all kids seem fascinated with wildlife, especially getting their hands in the soil and looking at creepy crawlies.

Loss of habitat is a major problem affecting Britain's wildlife, so a welcoming garden can act as a refuge. However, even with the best intentions there are still problems to be aware of. For example, with urban plots being very private and fenced off, unless you cut small fence holes at ground level, hedgehogs cannot roam from place to place looking for food or a mate.

Pollinators are key to the reproduction of some plants, and a good harvest in others. Encouraging bees, butterflies, hoverflies etc. pays great dividends to your garden, especially if you're growing food. Hoverflies and ladybirds are especially good at eating aphids, again a great benefit for food growers who often otherwise suffer from pests like blackfly.

## what can I do?

- Rule number 1: **do not use pesticides or herbicides**. Insects have a vital role in ecology; killing them indiscriminately breaks the chain and deprives other animals of food.
- All you need to see birds at close range is a window and a stick-on suction bird feeder.
- Build a wildlife pond. Half the UK's ponds have disappeared in the last 100 years. A pond can benefit a huge range of creatures, like frogs, newts, dragonflies, birds, bats & hedgehogs.
- Plant lots of flowers in the veg garden, as they bring in the beneficial invertebrates, e.g. English marigold or nasturtium for predatory insects (which feed on aphids / blackfly) and borage or poached egg plant for pollinators.
- Leave a patch of unmown grass - it will encourage shrews, which eat slugs.
- Create a wildlife meadow. Although grass is the most important element, this isn't about just stopping mowing. You need to research and sow flowers most appropriate to your own soil type and conditions.
- Window boxes and containers can be used to grow plants with many uses - e.g. chives and other herbs, to eat and to also attract butterflies; nasturtium for edible flowers and bumble bees, lavender for aromatic, culinary and medicinal use.
- Provide nectar plants for butterflies e.g. greater knapweed, Verbena bonariensis, borage,



*Spotted flycatcher - invertebrate feeder.*



*A flowery lawn.*

foxglove of any type, buddleia (preferably the variety 'Lochinch').

- Provide a nest box for birds. Blue or great tits are most likely to make a box their home.
- Become a beekeeper. Seldom will you find a more passionate and welcoming bunch of people than your local beekeeping group.
- Create an open compost heap, or leave a pile of branches & leaves to provide a nesting place for hedgehogs and attract their food insects.
- Buy a ready-made red mason bee home. We advise ready-made in this instance because the tubes need to be an exact diameter and free of splinters for this bee to enter.
- Plant shrubs that produce winter berries for birds e.g. hawthorn, holly, rowan or ivy.
- Leave the dead plants in your herbaceous border intact over winter, providing precious hibernation space for all sorts of invertebrates.
- Plant night-scented flowers and put up boxes to attract bats, then watch for them at dusk.

Here's quick list of things to be aware of:

- Bat numbers have declined alarmingly as pesticides poison their food source and there are less roosting sites. They have protection in law, which means if you have bats, you might be restricted in what you can do with your roof.
- It's illegal to handle great-crested newts. They're protected by law and you need a license to deal with them.
- Some berries (e.g. yew - actually, the flesh is edible as long as you don't eat the seed);

flowers (e.g. foxglove); and bulbs (e.g. daffodil) are poisonous so always remember to tell a child or a novice not to put things in their mouth without being told they're safe.

- Bug hotels are available to buy, but are often not so good. First, many of the sticks are hollow all the way through (pointless if the insect is looking for shelter); second, the diameter of the hole often needs to be very specific and third, often the sticks have splinters, which will put insects off. A log pile in a damp spot is often just as good, and free.
- Cats are very bad news for wildlife; the Mammal Society recently reported that they're responsible for killing nearly 300 million birds, mammals and amphibians per year. We're not suggesting you get rid of beloved Fluffykins, but we couldn't leave this important information unsaid. But if you do have a cat, it's vital to have it neutered to prevent unwanted kittens.

## resources

- [lowimpact.org/wildlife-gardening](http://lowimpact.org/wildlife-gardening) for more info, courses, links, books, including:
  - Josie Briggs, *Wildlife Habitats for your Garden*
  - Chris Baines, *How to Make a Wildlife Garden*
  - Martyn Cox, *RHS Wildlife Garden*
- [wildaboutgardens.org.uk](http://wildaboutgardens.org.uk): RHS and Wildlife Trusts, encouraging wildlife in your garden
- [wildlife-gardening.co.uk](http://wildlife-gardening.co.uk): lots of info
- [growingnative.co.uk](http://growingnative.co.uk): guide to growing wild trees & flowers in the UK
- [garden-birds.co.uk](http://garden-birds.co.uk): bird identification and songs



*The common shrew is a carnivore, more closely related to moles than rodents. They are welcome guests, as they eat slugs and snails, but will be poisoned by garden pesticides.*

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