



Environmentally Friendly Gardening

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Making a Wildlife Garden

With a little help anyone can attract a wide variety of wild plants and animals into their garden or patch of land. By making a few simple changes, in no time at all you will be sitting back and enjoying your own "local nature reserve". The wildlife that visits your garden will give you plenty of entertainment and you will have more time to enjoy it too, because with a rich-habitat wildlife garden there is less need for weeding, clipping, mowing and spraying. You will be working with nature. When that happens life is easier for people, animals and plants.

As a wildlife gardener you will be making an important contribution to nature conservation. Wildlife is coming under increasing threat in this country, not alone in urban environments but in the countryside as well. Wild flowers such as primroses and cowslips are becoming rare in some areas - mainly because this habitat is being destroyed. Wildflower meadows are being built on, ploughed, sprayed with herbicides, or simply fed with fertiliser to encourage more grass to grow. Losing all these wild flowers is bad enough, but of course as the meadows disappear then so do the habitats for many of our butterflies and moths, our skylarks and all the beautiful creatures which live there. It's time we all started to do something. Starting your own wildlife garden can be your contribution.

As a wildlife gardener you need to take an interest in all the wild green spaces in your neighbourhood. Most of the large animals need more territory than the average garden will supply. For example, hedgehogs will roam over a number of green patches, and although your wildlife garden may be thronged with wild birds

from time to time, probably only a few pairs are nesting there. It is important to think of your garden as a "service station" for passing wildlife. If someone sprays the nettle-patch in the churchyard, or chops down the old trees in the park, you will lose some of your wildlife visitors. Your success will be strictly limited if your garden has to operate as a self contained island in a sea of tarmac and concrete.

Grow some native plants

The food chain begins with plants. Many of the grubs, caterpillars and other plant eaters are extremely specialised. They may well be able to eat the leaves of only one particular plant type, and when this is the case the plant will always be native. For example the caterpillars of the Small Tortoiseshell butterfly eat nothing except the young leaves of nettles. All native plants - trees, shrubs and wildflowers will have their own dependent leaf eating creepy-crawlies, so if you grow a range of

plants you will attract a wider variety of insects which means a wider variety of birds and animals to feed on them.

Allow room for decay

Dead material is important as food for wildlife. In fact, far more types of wild creatures feed on dead and rotting material than on living plants. Try not to clear away all the garden rubbish. If the lawn is covered with fallen leaves, rake them up and throw them under a hedge. Hedgehogs will curl up and hibernate in piles of old leaves.

Cut down on Chemicals

At the bottom end of the food chain, plant and animal life is very vulnerable. When the first greenfly appear in spring it is always tempting to spray them with a chemical poison. Please don't. (If you have just a little patience, you will see that a well balanced, rich habitat garden has ways of dealing with greenfly, slugs,

A robin marks his territory on a cold winters evening



it's easy | to make a difference



Spring flowers such as the Primrose and lesser celandine will brighten up your wild flower garden

caterpillars and all other creatures which the modern gardeners call pests). If you spray the greenfly then you will almost certainly kill their natural predators, Ladybird larvae. Then your plants really will be in trouble because the "pests" always recover more quickly than the predators.

The other effect of chemicals is even more serious. All the animals you love best depend on plants or plant eating animals for food. For example hedgehogs will eat dozens of slugs; baby blue-tits will keep their parents busy collecting hundreds of caterpillars. If you spray the greenfly or put down slug pellets you will inevitably finish up poisoning the baby blue-tits and hedgehogs as well.

A garden free from chemicals rarely suffers from any sort of epidemic as nature has a way of balancing things out if left to its own devices. Try to work with nature and understand it, not to master it. It is somewhat like a pet dog, no matter how much you train it, it will always have its own personality and independence.

Provide lots of breeding sites

Wild creatures need somewhere safe to breed. Native plants and decaying leaf litter will keep many small creatures happy. However bringing some big lumps of timber into the garden and building a log pile will help further. In no time this mini-habitat will be alive with all kinds of

wood boring beetles, wood wasps and grubs. In autumn numerous toadstools will appear. If the pile is big enough it may nest spiders or even a pair of wrens or robins. The insects will attract birds and animals. Planting a mixture of Hawthorn, Field maple, Wildrose and Wild privet will provide a good hedgerow environment. Nesting boxes provide a good substitute for holes in dead trees where many birds would normally make their home in a woodland environment.

The Wildflower Meadow

Informal Lawn: If the grass is left unmown for just a few weeks towards the end of spring you will be surprised at just how many wildflowers will stick their flowerheads up for the first time. After the display has faded you must cut the grass, if you don't the grasses will overshadow the leaves of the rosette plants and the daisies will die out.

Spring Meadow: You could on the other hand leave the grass uncut from early spring right through summer to July and let all the wonderful spring flowers and grasses do their thing. Some of the wild flowers you can expect to find in spring meadow are Cowslips, (still to be found in old pastures), Meadow buttercup, Oxeye daisy, lots of vetches and trefoils and all the grasses.

Summer Meadow: A summer meadow requires yet another mowing regime. Mow the grass regularly through the spring (not too short) and then leave it uncut from midsummer to autumn. The taller wildflowers such as Field scabious and Greater knapweed will encourage lots of butterflies to drop in and perhaps breed. Cut the hay in the autumn and don't forget to remove it.

Making a Wildflower Meadow

Improving an Existing Meadow: There are a few ways of making a wildflower meadow. If the grass is very weedy and starved you can leave it uncut for a few months in summer. You will probably only have Dandelions, Yarrow, Buttercups and Clover, a very pleasing combination, but one that could be greatly improved by introducing some of the more choice plants. This can be done in two ways:

(1) *Wildflower seed, available in most garden centers, can be sown onto an established lawn. It is important that the seed is in good contact with the soil so you must scarify the surface. This*

involves ripping bare patches in the lawn with a rake, exposing the soil and removing a lot of the old matted grass. The area should then be rolled after the seed is sown. This method will only work if the soil fertility is very low. If it isn't the grasses will grow too quickly and swamp the young seedlings. Even with perfect conditions germination will be poor, so it is advisable to sow a lot more seeding than is necessary.

(2) *Alternatively you can sow the seeds in trays of seed compost. When they have germinated transfer them into individual pots for planting out in spring or autumn using a "bulb planter". While you are at it you could plant some bulbs such as wild Daffodils, Snowdrops, Crocus and Bluebells.*

Starting from scratch: The best way of making a wildflower meadow is to start from scratch with bare soil. It is just like sowing a new lawn with a few differences. The most important difference is low fertility, so use no fertiliser when preparing the soil and even remove some topsoil if necessary. Prepare the site by removing all unwanted perennial weeds like Docks, Thistles, Couch grass etc. While it is best not to use chemicals it may be the only option in the preparatory stages. Choose one such as "Weedall" which is non-residual and does least damage to wildlife. Remove any stones and rake until you have a fine filth. Leave it for three or four weeks. This will allow the soil to settle and the fresh crop of weed-seeds you have exposed will have germinated. These weeds can then be sprayed with weedkiller.

Choice of Seed: Early autumn is the best time to sow your meadow with midspring the alternative. The seed mixture you choose will depend on your soil type and whether it is going to be a spring or summer meadow. The grasses are not very choosy and should grow in most soils and either type of meadow. As long as you don't choose Ryegrass you can't go wrong. Ryegrass is a tough vigorous grass used for hardwearing lawns and football pitches and must be avoided at all costs. You can spice up your mix from the garden centre by collecting some grass seed from the nearest piece of wasteground. Wildflowers are more choosy and you will have to choose the right ones for the right situations. For a spring meadow choose Cowslip, Speedwell, Catsear, Selfheal, Hoary plantain, Yellow rattle, Salad burnet and lots of Ox-eye daisy. For a summer



meadow again choose lots of Ox-eye daisy, Meadow buttercup, Lady's bedstraw, Wild carrot, Common knapweed, Field scabious and Meadow cranesbill. When the seed has been sown run over it with a rake and then lightly firm with a roller.

Stretch some black cotton with pieces of foil on it over the whole area to keep the sparrows off. If the conditions are right the grass will be up in about a week, and by the end of September the grass will need its first cut. The best way is to use a shears. If you use a mower make sure it is very sharp, otherwise it will pull the young seedlings out. Never cut lower than 2" and afterwards use the roller to firm in any loose seedlings. A lot of the wildflower seeds will not germinate until the spring, and for the first season there will not be many flowers, so there is no reason for not mowing through the summer. Set the blades as high as they will go and remove the clippings. This will encourage the grass and wildflowers to spread out and will produce a good root system. Come the second season your meadow should be ablaze with colour and it won't be long before the wildlife begins to move in.

Cutting the Tall Meadow: When the time comes to cut your meadow you will be faced with two foot tall grass and there is no way your mower will be able to cope. The best way of cutting a small area is to use a strimmer, for larger areas you may need to get in a motor-scythe. This and the strimmer could be hired out for the few days they are needed. Leave the hay to dry for a few days. This allows the seeds to fall out and the insects that were living amongst the stems to find new homes. You must not let the hay rot back into the soil. Remove it and you can look forward to a meadow of tall swaying grasses and brightly coloured flowers alive with butterflies.

A Bird table

You can help birds and attract them to your garden by providing food for them during the cold winter months. It is important, however, to continue feeding them once you start, as they come to rely on such readily available supplies.

A bird table is very simple to construct. A piece of timber about the size of a tea-tray will do. It should have a rim all round to prevent food being blown away. Small gaps at the corners will make cleaning easier. Nail this to a post and site it away from shrubberies, which only provide

cover for cats etc. A twig stapled to the side of the table will provide a perch for birds before feeding.

Water should be provided, as birds must bathe to keep their feathers in good shape. A hole can be cut out so that a shallow bowl can be fitted. Hooks are also useful as food such as nuts can be hung from them. Low vegetation or grass beneath the table will encourage ground feeding birds such as the Dunnock, Wren, and Blackbird.

Any of the following foods can be provided: cheese, cooked potato, cake, wild-bird seed, peanuts (not salted), suet, nuts, fresh coconut, fresh fruit, raisins, fat, moist bread, oatmeal, meaty bones or tinned dog food. Salted foods, dried coconuts or dehydrated foods should not be provided.

The Hedgerow

Tree and Shrublife: A woodland type environment is a very good means of introducing diversity into your garden. A tree will provide food, support, a home and a host of different environments for plants and animals. March is a very good month for planting. In a small garden a hedge provides perhaps the best means of introducing native plants. Hawthorn, *Field maple, Yew, Native privet, Holly, Dog rose and *Beech all make marvelous hedgerow plants. Each of them supports its own particular range of dependent insects (143 in the case of the Hawthorn for example), and of course the dense twiggy growth provides good cover for nesting birds and shy creatures such as the hedgehog. Plant two year old nursery-grown seedlings in blocks, with about 200mm (8 inches) between the plants. If your garden is big enough, do plant a tree or two. Oak is the best for wildlife and supports up to 284 species of insect, but it grows quite large. Alder and Silver birch are also good for wildlife, and there are native Wild cherries, Rowan, Crab apple and Field maple too - all suitable for gardens. (*Non Native)

Climbers such as Honeysuckle and Ivy will use trees as support but these also can be grown in the tiniest garden or terrace. They both grow quickly, do well in sun or shade, and they provide nectar, edible fruits and valuable cover for wildlife.

By mid-October most plants have finished but the Common ivy is just beginning. Its flowers are particularly important as a

rich source of autumn nectar to feed Tortoise shells and other overwintering butterflies. One species of butterfly, the Hollyblue, depends on the flowers and young shoots of ivy to feed its autumn brood of caterpillars.

Bramble is another marvelous plant for wildlife all year round, providing a blossom rich in pollen, and leaves which feed a whole host of native insects. The blackberries though, are the bramble's crowning glory. Like many other wild fruits they are at their best in September bringing a real splash of autumn colour to the hedgerow. They are a favourite food for Blackbirds and Thrushes. The Elderberry bears fruit in September too, and its popularity, particularly with Starlings is obvious when you see the purple staining on the pavement beneath their roosts.

December is a good month for pruning trees and shrubs. One way of maintaining a plentiful supply of the leaves of native shrubs and trees in a small garden is to grow several of them as coppiced shrubs. You may well not have room for full grown specimens of large trees. Lack of space may prevent you from enjoying their flowers and fruit but most of their dependent insects and other resident creatures simply need a supply of tender leaves. If you cut any of these trees or shrubs down to the ground in December, then they will shoot up again the following spring and provide a crop of vigorous shoots and ample food for an enormous range of caterpillars and other leaf eaters.



Bumble bee and clover



Holly Tree (*Ilex aquifolium*)

Growing Trees from Seed

Growing native trees from seed is both easy and fascinating, making a satisfying and personal contribution to conservation. Seeds may be sown directly where the trees are to grow or in old grow bags, seed trays or yoghurt pots with holes in the bottom. Seeds should be sown in a peat/sand compost using a separate tray for each species, which are then stood in water until moist. Cover with clear polythene and stand trays away from direct sunlight. In the garden, seeds can be sown about 10cm apart and covered with their own depth of soil. All seedlings should be transplanted after one seasons growth to provide them with more space in which to grow, to prevent deep tap roots forming and to encourage a fibrous root growth. Transplants are ready for planting in their final position when about 2 feet high. Late autumn, when the soil is still warm, is the best time for planting. Never let the roots dry out while planting. Keep the young trees well watered and clear of competing weeds for the first two years and protect from rodents and grazing animals.

The following native species should be treated as described:

ALDER (*Alnus glutinosa*): Cut small cone bearing twigs from the tree in autumn. Dry cones on trays and separate seed by shaking. Store in sealed containers and sow the next spring.

ASH (*Fraxinus excelsior*), **HAWTHORN** (*Crataegus monogyna*) and **BLACKTHORN**:

Collect keys and Haws when fully ripe in October. *Stratify for 18 months and sow in the second spring

HAZEL (*Corylus avellana*): Collect nuts when browning begins. *Stratify for 18 months and sow in the second spring

HOLLY (*Ilex aquifolium*): Collect berries in December. *Stratify for 18 months and sow in the second spring

OAK (*Fraxinus excelsior*): Oak is the most important wildlife tree. Gather ripe acorns in autumn, avoiding any with splits or blemishes. Free from cups and sow 5cm deep or stratify and sow the next spring. Oaks can be sown where they are to grow by pushing a stick 5cm into moist soil, inserting the seed and closing the hole with the heel. Beech can be treated the same way.

WILLOW, POPLAR ALDER ELDER, GUELDER ROSE and FUSCIA may be grown from cuttings inserted into the soil between October and March. Cuttings should be as thick as one's forefinger and about 23cm long, planted firmly with not more than 8cm above ground. An excellent way to plant steep banks.

ROWAN (*Sorbus aucuparia*) and **WILD CHERRY** (*Prunus avium*): Collect berries as soon as they ripen in September. *Stratify and sow the next spring.

Stratification

Stratification is a period of cold storage equivalent to winter that some seeds require before they will germinate. It involves mixing the seed with 3 x its own volume of moist sand and storing it in unglazed pots sunk in the garden or alternatively, in a refrigerator at 20C.

Conclusion

The ideal rich-habitat garden will look something like a flowery woodland glade. Trees and shrubs along the northern and eastern sides will provide shelter and create a woodland-edge habitat – a very good for songbirds. At the very least plant a hedge. If you introduce some woodland flowers in the sunniest part of your glade this will act as a feeding area, and should have something in flower all year round. There is no such thing as a standard garden. Some may want to turn their whole patch into a meadow whilst others may only want to stop using chemical sprays and provide a wood pile. The important thing is to have a go!

Further Reading

Creating a Wildlife Garden: *Chris Baines*
 Wildlife Garden Notebook: *Chris Baines*
 The Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe: *Richard Fitter et al*
 Field Guide to the Trees and Shrubs of Britain: *Readers Digest*
 Go Wild at School: *Patrick Madden*



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ENFO is a service of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

Printed on recycled paper
 February 2004

