

Dispelling the myths and  
misunderstandings of  
wildlife gardening

Dr Paul Peace

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## **About the author**

In writing this series, Paul Peace is drawing upon a life-long interest in wildlife and gardening. His passion began as a child in the beautiful countryside of Suffolk, where he was lucky enough to live in a thatched cottage with a large garden backing onto farmland. His interest continued into adulthood and into the city and he now has a thriving wildlife garden in Sheffield.

Paul writes wildlife gardening features for newspapers e.g. the Sheffield Star and appeared as a weekly panelist voicing concerns for the environment on ITV1's Last Orders series. He is also a keen wildlife photographer with a burgeoning wildlife gardening photo library. He offers wildlife gardening consultations and talks and has worked voluntarily for Campaign to Protect Rural England, Friends of the Peak District and Sheffield Wildlife Trust.

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## **Dispelling the myths and misunderstandings of wildlife gardening**

There are a number of myths around wildlife gardening that need to be replaced by facts! Like many myths, there is just enough in them to keep them circulating and believable but they are misleading and simplistic.

### ***Wildlife Gardening is 'Messy'***

Without doubt, an overgrown garden can be beneficial for some wildlife. A lawn left unmown will allow wild flowers to flower and set seed and will be home to mammals and amphibians. A bramble thicket will provide safe nesting cover away from prowling cats. Messy is not all good news, however. Trees and hedgerows that are left unpruned have a loose, unsupportive structure that may be less attractive to nesting birds.

Many people prefer a garden that is more visually attractive. There is no reason why formality cannot be combined with utility. For example, formal borders can be full of nectar and seed-bearing plants.

Wildlife gardening usually involves managing the garden, knowing when to leave it alone and when to do maintenance. This will promote biodiversity - making conditions right for as many different types of plant and animal as possible. So the gardener who likes a formal border could make the world of difference for hibernating insects such as ladybirds by the simple act of leaving dead perennial stems until spring.

So a wildlife garden can be as messy or tidy as you want - just like an ornamental garden, though relaxing a little and knowing when to leave it alone can be helpful.

### ***Wildlife Gardening is Easy***

This myth is a spin-off from the 'wildlife gardening is messy' myth. In fact, wildlife gardening ranges from very little work like planting some chives and thyme, to heavy work like digging out a pond, to year round management of a meadow which requires mowing at a set height and at the correct times of the year. You choose how much time and energy you wish to devote to helping wildlife. The creation and maintenance sections in **Chapter 2** should help you decide.

### ***Wildlife Gardens are Country Gardens***

Simply not true! Urban areas are full of wildlife. Buildings can provide nesting and roosting sites for birds and bats that are similar to trees and cliffs. Flowers provide nectar and seeds for winged visitors whether they are rooted in an urban or rural area. Although cars and pollution can be detrimental, urban life is sometimes safer compared to the countryside where chemical sprays are used. One further example is that garden ponds are increasingly important for amphibians because country wetlands and ponds are being drained to make way for farmland and city ponds are being filled in due to excessive concerns about safety.

### ***There's No Point in Bothering in a Small City Garden***

It is easy to focus on one garden and miss the bigger picture. Britain has over 250,000 hectares of gardens. Imagine flying like a bird above a city. Looking down you would see a mass of gardens. It would then become apparent that each garden forms a small piece in a huge patchwork. As a bird you can stop off at different bird tables, treating them as stepping stones where you can feed. If you were a butterfly you could flit from garden to garden, feeding on energy-giving nectar. Animals such as hedgehogs can scurry from garden to garden looking for food such as slugs and places to hide from cats. What you do in your garden is a modest but valuable contribution to a much larger local picture. At an individual level you will notice the difference in even the smallest garden and you will be rewarded well for your efforts.

### ***Wildlife Gardens are Boring***

Many wild flowers are quite small and paler than their cultivated counterparts. Some people find the subtlety and paler colours more relaxing and peaceful. However, many are very colourful, such as poppies and daffodils. There is always something happening in a wildlife garden, a scurrying hedgehog, bats and moths at night, a dawn chorus early in the morning, birds, dragonflies and bees in the daytime, scented flowers in the evening. There are frogs and butterflies to watch throughout their fascinating lifecycles. Wildlife gardens are very exciting and few people make a complete return to ornamental gardening; it's very interesting and very addictive.

### ***Human Activities are Unwelcome***

A garden often has to serve as a playground for children, a place to grow food, somewhere to dry laundry and somewhere to eat outdoors. All these activities can still take place in a successful wildlife garden. Digging soil over can provide mason bees and birds with moist soil for nest building. Pruning creates lush, fresh growth for caterpillars and structure for nesting birds. Again a wildlife gardening is not necessarily a messy garden left untouched by the hand of humans.

### ***My Neighbours Will Complain!***

Again, a wildlife garden does not have to be messy and there are even ways of making a messy garden look managed such as mowing the edges of a wild flower meadow. As with any type of gardening, good planning will ensure you do not plant trees where they will block light or climbers that will wander into unwanted places. The majority of wild flower seeds do not blow into neighbours gardens; most fall nearby. Those that do wander will probably be welcomed once neighbours recognise them and see the animals they attract to your garden. Politely, you could also point out that before gardens existed in your area it was a wild area and you're trying to give something back to nature. Invite them round and point out the benefits of wildlife gardening for wildlife and the more pleasurable aspects. If there are children next door try to get them enthused as they are often more receptive!

## ***You Either Have a Wildlife Garden or You Do Not***

People, including conservationists, gardeners and other professionals often talk about wildlife gardens as if they are distinct from ornamental gardens which are viewed as sterile. This simplifies things and can be a useful way of distancing it from other, less wildlife friendly types of gardening. However, *all* gardens already contain wildlife. At the same time, almost *all* could be improved. Let's take a couple of contrasting examples.

In the first, someone has totally paved over their garden with concrete slabs because they are not keen on gardening. Even here there will be minibeasts such as woodlice, ants and earthworms under the surface and wild flowers will grow in the cracks. Even if all the wild flowers, lichens and mosses have been killed by spraying weedkillers, butterflies might be seen basking in the sun and hedgehogs might feast on slugs in wet weather and use the garden as a convenient run to more rich pickings.

Obviously, this kind of garden could be improved a great deal to increase its biodiversity. Given that this person is not keen on gardening, a wildlife garden could be created that requires little effort. Some types of wildlife gardening require no further work, such as leaving a pile of logs to rot, and are actually better left undisturbed. Taking out just one slab could make room for chives. They would require no maintenance, provide nectar for butterflies and are delicious herbs for cooking.

Living next door is a couple who are very keen gardeners. The garden has trees, hedges, a bird table and nesting box, a pile of dead wood and a pond. This garden is rich in wildlife. Birds use the nesting box, bird table and hedges to breed, feed and roost, and can be heard singing in the trees. The pile of dead wood provides a habitat for invertebrates and frogs. The pond is an oasis for birds to drink and bathe, for frogs, newts and toads to breed and for hundreds of insects including dragonflies, and aquatic life such as diving beetles. By all accounts, this is a relatively biodiverse garden. The garden could still be improved, however.

Unfortunately, the gardeners have planted many shrubs that are beautiful to look at but not very useful to wildlife. They do provide valuable shelter but native wildlife has not adapted to feed on most of the flowers of the exotic shrubs. The gardeners have also thrown garden rubbish into the surrounding countryside and non-native plants have begun to spread rapidly and out-compete native plants. On bonfire night they set fire to the pile of dead wood without checking for hedgehogs and they are fond of using slug pellets which not only poison slugs but also the animals which feed on them such as birds, frogs and hedgehogs.

They use a lot of manufactured fertilisers which find their way into surrounding natural water, encouraging green slime. The owners have not considered building a nest for bees, a home for hedgehogs, a bat box, a compost heap, or devoting a small area of the garden to a wild meadow. They love to see butterflies yet whilst they are in their caterpillar stage they regard them as pests and reach for the pesticides.

It should be clear from these examples that whether a garden is a wildlife garden or not is a simplistic question. A garden is almost always wildlife friendly in some respects but wildlife-unfriendly in others. It is therefore necessary to think carefully about *which aspects* are friendly and which are harmful, what should be left alone, what should be managed, and what should be created afresh.

### ***You Need Green Fingers***

There is no such thing as 'green fingers'. It's simple: there are people who care enough to give plants what they need and people who do not. It is surprising how many people who claim they are no good at gardening because they do not have green fingers are perfectly capable of feeding and watering a pet. Plants, just like animals, have needs that need to be met if they are to thrive. They are not usually complex: they need space, water, food, air and a growing medium. Some require a little extra attention here and there such as pruning, support or control of disease. There's no magic involved!

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