

Introduction to Wildlife Gardening



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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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Introduction to Wildlife Gardening

Wildlife gardening, quite simply, means creating and maintaining a garden that is good for wildlife. It is often confused with the 'wild garden' so it is best to address this first. Although there is much overlap, many wild gardens are not aimed at conservation. They are often simply informal gardens where less obvious control is exerted over the plants. Wild gardens are also often full of exotic species but grown in such a way as to mimic their growth in the wild in their countries of origin. So, for example, a magnolia might be left to grow wild in an oriental style wild garden where huge quantities of peat have been imported to recreate the rich, acidic soil of its natural homeland. It is not, however, a representation of a British wilderness and the peat used would actually be contributing to the destruction of British peat bogs.

A form of wildlife gardening began in the distant past when plants were brought into gardens from the wild for culinary or medicinal purposes. Gardening to help conserve native species would not have been a concern since the land was not under the pressure it is today and the homes of native species such as ponds were still relatively untouched.

As food and medicine became commercially available the garden was freed up to become a place of leisure and the romantic cottage garden became more popular. With its wild or relatively uncultivated plants, the cottage garden remained useful for wildlife and planting for butterflies, bees and birds would often be deliberate. As industrialisation and intensive farming took hold, wildlife was increasingly pushed into gardens and with the green movement slowly gaining momentum, the idea of gardening specifically for wildlife became a more conscious effort.

Alongside this, however, there was a fashion for the many showy plants which were being developed by selective breeding or for formal gardens full of non-flowering shrubs such as conifers, and relatively sterile expanses of closely mowed lawn. This continues today and these types of plants and gardens do not provide for wildlife in the way that native plants and semi-natural habitats do.

Nowadays wildlife gardening is becoming increasingly popular. T.V garden design programmes have regularly promoted it and there are more native wildlife

programmes. No.10 Downing Street had a wildlife pond installed by The Wildlife Trusts and more and more garden centres and websites are selling products for wildlife over and above the usual assortment of bird products.

Britain has a rich flora and fauna. For example, the British Isles are home to more than 20,000 insect species, around 2,500 of which are butterflies and moths and over 3500 of which are beetles. There are more than 500 species of midge and several thousand different kinds of fungi. There are 69 species of native wild mammals and around 1500 native flowering plants.

Unfortunately, this rich natural heritage has been under threat for many years, often due to destruction of natural habitats by people. Species have been lost as hedgerows and trees have been cut down to make fields bigger, fields have been sprayed with weedkillers which kill wild flowers, wildlife-rich land has been built on and replaced by factories or manicured residential gardens, ponds have been filled in, water has been polluted, peat bogs have been mined, and so on.

Some wildlife has adapted well to cope with human activities. Some plants have developed resistance to weedkillers and are able to withstand constant ploughing, for example. Many animals have 'moved in' with us, e.g. some species of wasp, bird, bat, rodent, and mammal, such as urban foxes. Other animals are threatened by human activities and are finding it difficult to coexist. They desperately need our help to reverse the damage. If we are to pass on a rich natural heritage to future generations it is necessary to help all our wildlife, whether currently under threat or not.

If a person is hungry or thirsty or needs a home we try to provide for them, either in person, via state help, or through a charity. Luckily people can communicate their needs to other people. Unfortunately, plants and wild animals cannot. As intelligent beings, and especially as animals who have individually and collectively inflicted damage on the planet's wild inhabitants, most of us are beginning to recognise the need to do something, however small, to help those without a voice. Many of us are not sure what to do or where to start. This book will help you to make a modest but valuable contribution.

There are two major ways of conserving wildlife: protecting existing habitats and creating new ones. Wildlife

conservation organisations spend a great deal of time, effort and money protecting and managing existing habitats whether these are nature reserves, sites of special scientific interest, parks, beaches, woodlands or urban green spaces. They also campaign against harmful human practices such as peat mining. The work is carried out by devoted and unsung people, many of whom give their time voluntarily, or are poorly paid, to ensure the continued survival of native species. In addition to management of existing habitats, wildlife organisations aim to create new habitats to replace those lost. Tree planting, converting open cast mines and quarries, and seeding wasteland are examples of this important work.

The creation and maintenance of habitats is increasingly carried out locally by councils and responsible businesses in accordance with national targets. These targets are set at the Earth Summits where around 150 countries get together and sign biodiversity conventions aimed at protecting the world's wildlife. 'Biodiversity', put simply, means promoting and retaining as many different species of wildlife as possible. A National Biodiversity Action Plan is developed from these global decisions, and then broken down further into manageable and locally appropriate Biodiversity Action Plans which take account of species variations across the UK.

Gardens form a massive network of mini green spaces that are, or have potential to be, very valuable for wildlife. As natural landscapes are built upon for accommodation the amount of land taken up by gardens increases whilst the relative amount of natural landscape decreases. Some gardens may already contain useful habitats while others may require the creation of new ones. Gardens are a very special resource because, unlike most green spaces, they are managed by independent people rather than councils, developers, and private institutions. Here, individuals really can make a lasting difference that will not usually be under pressure from building, mining, pollution, farming, and so on.

Gardens account for a massive area of land. This land, which amounts to more than 250,000 hectares, was once natural habitat and only humans prevent it from being so once again. Wildlife gardens are valuable 'stepping stones'. For example, butterflies and bees can 'step' from garden to garden collecting nectar. Birds can step between bird tables to eat foods put out for them, or between hedges to consume berries or insects. If enough

people make their gardens wildlife friendly, mini 'green corridors' are formed. Green corridors are long strips of land that are used by wildlife to get safely between locations. Other examples of green corridors are railway embankments, roadside verges, canals, long hedgerows, streams and rivers.

Wildlife gardens are very dynamic. Most people appreciate how gardens change with the seasons as different plants come into flower. With a wildlife garden, things are changing moment by moment because you will be gardening for animals as well as plants and of course, animals are more obviously active and mobile. Different animals will visit a wildlife garden. Some animals will be fleeting visitors such as feeding birds and butterflies, and some will spend a long time in the garden such as a hibernating hedgehog or developing tadpoles.

Although gardens can potentially be dangerous places for wild animals with domestic cats roaming and sometimes glass, rubbish and poisons, they can also be one of the richest habitats for wildlife. Wildlife has some very basic needs: food, water, places to shelter and places to breed. Gardens can often offer excellent provision of these, sometimes in concentrations higher than in the wild.

Food is often easier to come by than in the wild with a high density of flowering plants for nectar, pollen and seeds, a long season of flowering, shrubs with berries and a frequent supply of new foliage following pruning, fruit and vegetables, easy worming on the manicured lawn, food intentionally offered such as peanuts and food that was not such as sugary drinks and disposed kitchen waste.

Water is often provided by a garden pond, and with top-ups from its owners in dry weather and breaking of ice in freezing weather, it can be a more reliable source than in the wild. Shelter and places to breed may also be easier to find for certain organisms than in the wild, for example, walls, paving slabs and outbuildings, as well as dense planting.

However, while we should celebrate the rich habitat a garden can be, we should also bear a couple of things in mind. Firstly, not all gardens are as rich as the idealised version we tend to think of; many are nothing but lawns or paved areas with children and domestic animals making less than ideal hosts. So most gardens need to be viewed as *potential*. Secondly, a danger of celebrating the success of

wildlife in gardens is that it can be used to justify inaction and to forget the damage human beings are inflicting on the natural environment.

Only a relatively small number of species can prosper in gardens. Some wildlife is absolutely dependent on fast-disappearing natural habitats. Those animals that do live in association with us have often done so not because gardens are ideal but because they have had no choice due to habitat destruction. We should therefore retain a balanced approach – gardens are essential to some animals, useful to others and useless to others. They are exciting and fun yet the need for them is a symbol of our collective damage to wild habitats; amongst the pleasure, a certain sense of remorse should accompany wildlife gardening. It is not an either/or choice between promoting natural habitats or gardens – both are invaluable.

Wildlife gardening requires a more gentle and relaxed approach. This is psychologically and financially beneficial. Instead of working against nature by trying to make and alkaline soil acidic in order to grow plants that would not ordinarily grow there, plants are chosen to suit the soil type. Instead of poisoning the environment and risking the health of people, pets and wildlife by using chemical pesticides, natural predators and less harmful alternatives are used.

These are the ideals, then, but not all people will want to make all the changes necessary for the ideal wildlife garden. So rather than take an all or nothing approach where we decide to garden for wildlife or not, it is important to do *something*, however small, to make a difference. Many people start with a small number of changes and implement more as they gain interest and understanding. Others may take the approach that some of their gardening practices are not good for wildlife but they seek to counterbalance these by doing other things that are. Another compromise is to set aside a separate area which is totally devoted to the needs of wildlife.

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