

WILDLIFE GARDENING GLOSSARY

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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Wildlife Gardening Glossary

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Abdomen - the main body section of an animal.

Acid soil - acid soils have a pH below 7.0. Most plants prefer a slightly acid soil of around pH 6.5. Some, such as rhododendrons and azaleas have to have acidic condition to thrive. Others are more tolerant.

Aesthetics – the way things look; their appearance.

Agricultural intensification - in order to remain competitive, farmers have increasingly needed to obtain as much produce as they can out of a given piece of land. To increase crop yields or the number of animals that can be farmed, a number of practices have become commonplace, usually to the detriment of wildlife. These include the use of chemicals and the removal of hedgerows and trees.

Alkaloid - a nitrogen-based compound which, when consumed, can have very powerful effects on the body. Many types are highly toxic.

Allergen - a substance which can cause an allergic reaction.

Alkaline soil - has a pH of above 7.0. Some plants can tolerate a wide range of pHs but others must have an alkaline soil such as the those which grow naturally on chalky soils.

Alpine plant - strictly speaking, a plant which grows wild on high mountain slopes above the tree line (beyond the highest point where trees can survive). More loosely used to describe rockery plants (many of which are true alpines but some are not).

Amphibian - a cold-blooded vertebrate, typically living on land but breeding in water.

Annual - a plant which goes through a complete life cycle in one year.

Antenna (pl. antennae) - stalked sensory organs on the head of some invertebrate animals.

Aquatic - plants or animals which live in water.

Astringent - contracts bodily tissues and halts bleeding.

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Berry - a fleshy fruit.

Biennial - a plant which goes through a complete life cycle in two years.

Biodegradable - something that rots - usually natural materials but occasionally synthetics which decompose.

Biodiversity - the number of species in a given area. In 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit 150 countries including the UK agreed that in order to pass on a rich and healthy environment to future generations it is necessary to act immediately to conserve and enhance the range of species and habitats in local areas - 'Think global, act local' is a commonly heard expression. A healthy environment has a very diverse range of plants and animals which all live within a system (an ecosystem). We need to protect all species whether they are presently common or rare.

Bird - a warm-blooded, egg-laying vertebrate that has feathers and wings (modified forelimbs).

Bog - an area which is always moist but not continuously waterlogged and acidic.

Bolting - refers to when a vegetable, in particular a brassica, goes from being a compact leafy plant to rapidly sprouting a long flower stem.

Brackish - slightly salty water.

Brassicas - a group of nitrogen-hungry plants which includes, for example, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, savoy, sprouts, broccoli, swede and turnip.

BTO - British Trust for Ornithology. An organisation dedicated to wild bird research. [BTO website](#)

BSA - Birdcare Standards Association. An organisation dedicated to wild bird health & safety. [BSA website](#)

Bulb - swollen underground leaf bases in some plants which store food while the plant rests through the cold winter and/or hot, dry summer.

Bulbils - new bulbs produced by a mature bulb which can be detached and grown.

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Calcareous soils - formed on chalk or limestone, containing large amounts calcium carbonate.

Carnivore - an organism that feeds on animals.

Catkin - hanging spike of very small, wind-pollinated flowers.

Chalk - soft calcium carbonate. Alkaline pH.

Chrysalis (or pupa) - stage during which a larva changes into an adult.

Clay soil - has very fine particles which cling together making it sticky and poorly drained unless constantly broken up.

Cocoon - silk enclosure.

Coir - coconut husk. Makes a good compost, mulch and peat substitute.

Compost - well rotted organic matter.

Conifer - an evergreen tree which bears cones.

Coppice - trees cut near to the ground and permitted to grow back before cutting and repeating the cycle. A sustainable resource, providing wood indefinitely.

Corm - a thickened underground plant stem which stores food. Similar to a bulb.

Crown - growing part of a plant above ground and on top of the rootstock from which new leaves emerge.

Cucurbits - cucumber family e.g. squash, cucumber, gourds, pumpkins and watermelons.

Cultivar - short for 'cultivated variety' which means a variety raised in cultivation (as opposed to wild). Such plants are bred deliberately for particular characteristics such as unnaturally large or long-lasting flowers, brighter colours or disease resistance.

Cutting - a section of stem, root, or leaf removed from a plant and encouraged to become a new, self-sufficient plant through the development of its own roots.

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Dead-heading - the removal of a dead flower to encourage a plant to put its energy into growth including new flowers rather than seed production.

Deciduous - a plant which loses its leaves ready for the winter. This is a protective measure as the uptake of water is inhibited during cold weather.

Decoction - water-soluble extracts of plant material obtained by boiling in water.

Decompose - organic matter which rots due to the actions of organisms which feed on dead material, such as bacteria and fungi.

Detritus - dead and decaying organic matter, e.g. leaf litter or mud on a pond floor.

Diuretic - promotes urine flow.

Diurnal – active by night and day.

Dormant - a long period of inactivity in a plant or animal.

Drill - in the context of a seed drill, a long, thin furrow or shallow trench made in the soil ready for sowing seeds. The displaced soil is replaced on top of the seeds.

Dune - wind-blown sand, usually with high shell content and therefore lime-rich.

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Ecology - the study of living things, their interactions with one another and with the environment.

Elytrum or Elytron - hardened forewing of an insect. The plural is elytra.

Emergents - plants which grow in shallow water at the margin/edge of a pond. Also known as 'marginals'.

Environment - strictly speaking, the non-living world around organisms such as air, soil and water but often extended to include the natural world around us.

Enzyme - a chemical produced by a living thing which changes one substance to another.

Erosion - the washing away of topsoil by rainwater.

Evergreen - a plant which has leaves all year round. Evergreens do lose leaves but this is done steadily over the whole year.

Exotic - not native to a country or area; taken there by a human. Syn. Non-native, introduced, ornamental.

Expectorant - increases the production or expulsion of phlegm from the respiratory tract.

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Fauna - animals.

Fen - a wet area which is more alkaline than a bog (which is acidic).

Fertiliser - contains nutrients useful to plants.

Field layer – woodland floor?

Fix / fixing - in the context of nitrogen this means the conversion of atmospheric nitrogen into a form useful to plants, a process carried out by bacteria.

Flora - vegetation.

Food chain - lower organisms are food (prey) for higher organisms (predators). These higher organisms are themselves food (prey) for even higher organisms (predators) in succession.

Food plant - a plant which provides a source of food for an animal.

Food web - a complex system of relationships between predators and prey.

Fruit - a seed or seeds and the fleshy part surrounding them.

FSC - Forest Stewardship Council. Wooden products carrying the FSC kitemark are guaranteed to come from well managed forests e.g managed in a sustainable manner and definitely not rainforest timber.
[FSC website](#)

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Gall - a swelling on a plant in response to an invading organism such as a mite, insect larva or fungus.

Genus or Genera (pl.) - a group/s of species with similar characteristics.

Gestation - the carrying of young in the uterus during pregnancy.

Green manure - a crop of plants grown purely for the purpose of digging them in to increase soil fertility. If allowed to drop seed the process can be self-sustaining.

Ground cover - plants which quickly cover bare ground.

Grub - larva.

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Habit - manner of plant growth, e.g. 'climbing' or 'creeping'.

Habitat - a place where living things are found and where they find some or all of their requirements for survival.

Half-hardy - needs some protection in cold weather especially further north.

Hardening off - to gradually acclimatise plants that are used to warmer conditions, e.g. in a greenhouse, to colder conditions and frost.

Healing in - common misspelling - see 'heeling in'.

Heath - usually acidic and exposed, composed of heathers and other heath plants. Relatively dry compared to moorland.

Hedgerow - a line of shrubs and sometimes trees. Some argue a true hedgerow also has a bank at its foot.

Heeling in - a temporary measure to keep plants healthy if you cannot plant them straight away, e.g. in dry, frosty or wet weather until conditions improve, or whilst away. A quick 'v'-shaped trench large enough for the roots is dug out. Plants are placed at 45° angle and covered with soil. The soil is pressed round the roots using the heel of the foot before watering. Sometimes spelt 'healing in'.

Herb - a very flexible term. Often thought of as a plant useful in cooking. Plants which are useful in other ways (or have been at some point in human history), perhaps medicinally, or for dyes or perfumes, are also herbs. Shrubs, trees, aquatic plants, etc. can also be included in the wider definition if they are useful to people.

Herbaceous perennial - plants with soft rather than woody stems which come up year after year.

Herbicide - weedkiller.

Herbivore - an organism that feeds only on vegetation.

Hibernation - a dormant phase, usually late autumn until early spring, where an animal's metabolism is greatly reduced. Its breathing and heart rate are slower and its body temperature lower. This decreased energy consumption allows the cold months, when food is scarce, to pass by without the need to feed.

Hip - a brightly coloured false fruit e.g. 'rose hip'.

Hoary - with short hairs, giving a greyish appearance.

Home range - this is the area covered by an animal during the course of normal daily activities.

Host - a plant or animal which supports another species. For example, nettles are host to many caterpillars. A host also refers to plants or animals which support a parasite. The plant or animal may or may not gain anything itself for its services.

Humus - the sticky organic matter which binds soil particles together. This can be increased by adding organic matter such as manure, compost or dead vegetation.

Hybrid - a cross between different genera, species, or varieties of plant.

Hyphae - the fine threads of a fungus. Not usually seen.

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Imago - the final, adult stage in the life cycle of an insect.

Improved soils - where nutrients such as nitrogen have been added in the form of synthetic fertilisers or organic materials such as manure. These soils suit vigorous grasses at the expense of less competitive wild flowers.

Indicator species - a species which plays a central role in the ecology of a habitat. Its frequency and health therefore serves as an indication of the general health of a habitat and local ecology as a whole.

Inflorescence - an inflorescence is a group of flowers packed together on the same main stem such as those found in teasels and umbellifers.

Infusion - water-soluble extracts of plant material obtained by steeping (soaking) in water that has been brought to boiling point.

Instar - one of a number of stages a larva or nymph will pass through. At each instar (stage) the larva or nymph is larger. Each stage is punctuated by a moult.

Introduced - not native to a country or area; taken there by a human.
Syn. Non-native, exotic.

Invertebrate - any species of animal that does not have a backbone.

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Larva (pl. larvae) - the second stage in the insect life cycle.

Leaching - minerals in soil are dissolved in rainwater and drain away. This is more of a problem on freely draining soils such as sandy soils.

Leaf litter - leaves which collect under trees, shrubs and other vegetation.

Legume / leguminous - plants that have seeds in pods such as peas, beans, vetches, sweet peas, clover, lupin, broom and laburnum. Good for increasing soil nitrogen levels as their roots harbour nitrogen fixing bacteria which convert atmospheric nitrogen into a form which plants can use.

Lime - in a gardening context, the fine particles of calcium carbonate (limestone or chalk) which can produce an alkaline soil.

Limestone - hard calcium carbonate, alkaline pH.

Loam - garden soil which has a crumbly texture due to a good level of humus, with an ideal balance of water retention and drainage. A mixture of particle sizes i.e sand, silt and clay present.

Log Garden - a pile of logs left to rot and providing a habitat for a vast array of creatures.

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Mammal - warm-blooded vertebrate animals with mammary glands in the female.

Manure - organic material such as animal faeces or plants which acts as a fertiliser.

Marginals - plants which grow in shallow water at the margin/edge of a pond. Also known as 'emergents'.

Marsh - land that is constantly wet with some standing water, not on peat.

Meadow - a mixture of grass and wild flowers, grazed or managed by a cutting regime.

Metamorphosis - the changes some animals undergo during their lifecycle e.g. from a caterpillar, through a chrysalis, to a butterfly.

Migrant - wildlife which does not reside in the UK and/or Ireland but visits from other countries in search of food, suitable breeding sites, etc.

Mimicry - an organism takes on the appearance of another organism and benefits from the protection this affords them.

Moorland - a heath which receives higher rainfall. Mostly heathers.

Mulch - a layer of material placed on the soil surface to suppress weeds, maintain a more constant temperature and minimise water evaporation, e.g. bark chippings.

Mycelium - the mat of hyphae which form the bulk of a fungus. Not usually seen.

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Native - organisms that are naturally present in a particular country, i.e. without interference by humans. This site focuses on British and Irish wildlife, so 'native' here means native to these countries unless otherwise stated. Some organisms are introduced but come to be regarded as natives (strictly speaking, these are 'naturalised'). Nettles were probably introduced by the Romans, for example, long after the UK and Ireland became separated from each other and the rest of Europe by the sea.

Natural succession - without interference from humans, domestic or farm animals, habitats progress through a series of stages. For example, a pond that is not fed by fresh water will collect sediment, making it progressively shallower. Eventually it will become a bog and then dry out. Grassland will take over, followed by larger plants. Increasingly larger shrubs and then trees follow, creating woodland. In another example a rock may be colonised by lichens and moss. These provide an anchor for pioneer plants. Debris from these produces a thin soil which supports more plants. Provided the rock is not exposed by the weather it will eventually become covered by vegetation and finally trees.

Naturalised - some species which would not naturally be found in this country have been introduced from abroad, often as garden plants or pets and have subsequently escaped into the wild. Most do not survive but a small number manage to meet all their requirements and start to reproduce.

Nectar - sugary substance produced by flowers which attracts insects and other pollinators.

Neutral - soil that has a pH of 7.0 which is mid way between acid and alkaline. A wide range of plants can be grown with most preferring very slightly acidic conditions. Adding garden compost should help to slightly acidify the soil if necessary. A light liming would make the soil more alkaline.

Nocturnal - active at night and inactive during the day.

Non-native - not native to a country or area; taken there by a human. Syn. introduced, exotic, ornamental.

Nutrients - plant foods such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

Nymph - young insects of species where the young are very much like the adult e.g. dragonflies. They only need to undergo a partial metamorphosis, changing gradually at each moult/instar. This contrasts with, say, a caterpillar which has to undergo a complete metamorphosis before it becomes a butterfly. Nymphs also often eat similar foods as adults whereas larvae eat different foods.

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Omnivores - animals that are capable of eating both plants and animals.

Organic - from a living organism. Anything that has lived before can become part of a future living organism. A simple example is how plants shed leaves which decay. Fungi and bacteria break down the leaves into minerals that return to the soil. These minerals then feed new plants which eventually die and so on.

Organic gardening - use of only natural resources rather than synthetics and working with, rather than against, nature.

Organism - a living thing.

Ornamental - not native to a country or area; taken there by a human.
Syn. Non-native, exotic.

Ovipositor - a tube at the end of an insect's abdomen used for laying eggs.

Oxygenators - pond plants which play a vital role in adding oxygen to the water which other organisms can use.

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Parasite - a parasite lives in close association with another species, taking from it (e.g. nutrition) but offering its host nothing in return.

Peat - a rich, brown organic material which is formed over hundreds of years as sphagnum moss or sedges die but do not decompose fully in the acidic and relatively lifeless water. A non-sustainable resource which should not be used.

Pedunculate - stalked flowers, e.g. those of the pedunculate oak.

Perennial - a plant which lives for many years. However, some perennials are best treated as annuals because they are at their best in their first year, e.g. feverfew.

Pergola - open structure made of wooden posts and arches.

pH - chemists would provide a complex explanation. For our purposes, pH is a scale ranging from 1 (very acidic) through 7 (neutral) to 14 (very alkaline). Natural soils never reach the extremities of this scale. However, it is important to know your soil pH as plants adapted to acid soils, for example, will often do poorly on alkaline soils (which is one reason you can travel around the country and see totally different vegetation).

Pod - long non-fleshy fruit containing seeds esp. in pea family.

Pond - a body of relatively stagnant water.

Population - numbers of one particular kind of species in a particular area.

Predator - an organism which feeds on another organism.

Prevailing wind - the direction the wind usually comes from.

Prey - an organism which provides food for another organism.

Pricking out - young seedlings in a seed tray soon become overcrowded and have little soil depth for developing roots. They therefore need to be removed carefully and given more space in pots or in the garden.

Proboscis - The tubular tongue of an insect.

Proprietary - as in 'proprietary compost' - bulk produced under a brand name.

Pupa (or chrysalis) - stage during which a larva changes into an adult.

Purgative - strong laxative.

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Raised bed - soil raised and contained by a wall, railway sleeper, etc.

Resident - resident garden wildlife lives in the garden, such as a plants, or at least stays there for part of its life cycle, such as caterpillars. Contrast this with a 'visitor' which comes and goes. In practice, few animals are truly resident as few have any interest in human boundaries and few can get all they need from one garden.

Rhizome - swollen underground plant stem which stores food and sprouts at a intervals, e.g. iris and lily-of-the-valley.

Rock garden or rockery - a well drained, usually sunny, garden containing rocks and alpine plants.

Rodent - small placental mammals with constantly growing incisor teeth.

Root ball - a plant's root network and the associated soil.

RSPB - The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. [RSPB website](#)

Runner - a slender stem which grows horizontally above ground and roots at intervals to produce new plants.

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Sandy soil - large particles and very well drained. Therefore poor water and nutrient retention unless organic material is added.

Saprophyte - an organism which feeds on dead material.

Scarifier - a mechanical rake which spins like a cylinder mower and rakes out dead grass (thatch) from lawns.

Scarification - the process of removing thatch from lawns. In another meaning, deliberately breaking down the tough waterproof coating on some seeds. This triggers germination by allowing water in.

Scree - loose small rocks found on upper mountain slopes and recreated in the rock garden.

Semi-evergreen - a plant which may or may not keep all of its leaves depending on the mildness or severity of a winter.

Sessile - stalkless flower, e.g. those of the sessile oak (also refers to permanently attached animals such as barnacles).

Shrub - a woody perennial with a branched habit. Smaller than a tree although the distinction is often blurred as with elder.

Slack - a damp hollow amongst sand dunes.

Soil conditioner - a material which affects the structure, nutrient level or pH of an existing soil.

Species - a group of organisms which all share the same characteristics and are capable of interbreeding. Different species have a combination of characteristics which is not shared with any other species.

Spp. - shorthand for a number of species.

Stolon - creeping stem above ground for vegetative reproduction.

Stratification - process of exposing seeds or bulbs to cold temperatures to simulate winter and stimulate germination.

Sub-shrub - small, spreading shrub.

Subsoil - the soil beneath the topsoil. Usually lighter in colour and with little organic matter or visible soil organisms. Rock will become more frequent were you to dig down towards the bedrock. In chalk soils this layer may be only a few centimetres down.

Sub-species - a group of individuals which have slight variations due to being geographically separated from the main species but are still capable of interbreeding and therefore not worthy of a separate special classification.

Sustainable - a resource or process that can be utilised indefinitely. Compost is sustainable as it can be produced forever. Peat takes hundreds of years to form and if it is used it cannot quickly be replaced (unsustainable). Fossil fuels such as oil take even longer (millions of years) to be replaced.

Sward - the thick mass of plants making up turf.

Symbiosis - two organisms living in close association, each providing something the other requires. Compare this harmonious give and take relationship with the selfish parasites.

Syn. (or =) - synonymous, i.e. two or more names are used for the same species.

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Taproot - the main, central root of many plants from which a network of smaller roots branch off. Wider at the top and narrowing along its length.

Tendrils - anchoring filaments used by climbing plants, e.g. pea family.

Territory - an area covered by an animal. Sometimes an area is claimed by an animal as 'theirs' and defended. Humans are perhaps the most territorial animals, claiming land that strictly 'belongs' to nobody as 'private property' and often defending it through war, fighting and argument.

Thermals - rising currents of warm air. Insects and birds (and para/gliders) can take advantage of these, gaining elevation without expending energy before gliding back to earth to slow the descent.

Thorax - the part of the body between the head and abdomen in most organisms. Usually the place where legs and wings are attached.

Tilth - a fine crumb soil structure.

Top dressing – ornamental lawns can be top dressed with compost, sand, soil and/or leafmould in early autumn to increase vigour, help thatch to degrade and to level out minor undulations. Sometimes brushed in after creating holes every 25cm or so with a fork or hollow tine aerator to nourish the roots and balance light or heavy soils.

Topsoil - the uppermost layer of soil. Most plant roots do not venture deeper than this. Nutrients are released from organic matter here and it is where the majority of soil-dwelling organisms live. Should not to be mixed with subsoil except for the creation of poor soil for a permanent wild flower area such as a meadow.

Tree - a very tall plant with a single thick woody stem at the base - some shrubs such as elder are classed as trees when left to grow unhindered.

Tuber - some plants have an underground storage organ developed from stems (e.g. potato) and roots (e.g. dahlia).

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Umbellifers - carrot family. Although the 'r' is not present in the spelling, the family are easy to remember because they have 'umbrella'-shaped flower heads ('umbels').

V [top](#)

Var. - shorthand for a number of varieties of plant within a species.

Variegation - leaves that have two or more distinct colours, often white, cream or yellow blotches on green, e.g. many ivies. A result of breeding, mutation, viral infection or a mineral deficiency.

Variety - a natural variation between plants of a particular species but not worthy of a separate species classification.

Vertebrate - an animal with a backbone.

Visitor - a visiting garden animal comes and goes, for example, a butterfly. Those that remain within the garden, at least for part of their life cycle, can be considered 'residents'.

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Wasteland - an area disturbed by humans but not cultivated.

Wild - organisms that live independently of human control i.e. they have not been domesticated in the way that domestic cats and dogs and farm animals have.

Wildlife - see 'wild'. Often used to mean 'wild animals' but it includes all wild organisms including plants.

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