

CREATING WILDLIFE HABITAT IN THE GARDEN



In the garden with Wendy Matheson

According to statistics the average UK garden covers 190m² or 2,050ft².

Many UK gardens are small but we have approximately 22 million of them. All this green space is vital as wildlife corridors creating rich and valuable habitats for insects, birds, small mammals and amphibians.

This doesn't mean that we are expected to turn our gardens into neglected patches of nettles and overgrown weeds. We can still provide a wonderful haven for wildlife while achieving an attractive and well-designed space. This can be achieved by looking at the overall space and designating areas to various types of productive and varied planting. If possible a pond and a wildflower area if space permits. Urban gardens can provide a much-needed refuge for wildlife displaced by intensive farming methods and linked with street trees, parks, verges, railway lines and even cemeteries provide stepping stones for wildlife to thrive.

If you should enter a successful wildlife garden you will be struck by the humming and the fluttering of bumblebees, hoverflies and butterflies industrious in their gathering of nectar or pollen and be immediately transfixed at the sight of native wildflowers mixed with cottage garden plants and marginal plants near water which are home to many and varied small mammals and invertebrates.

A wildflower meadow is a larger task than sometimes thought but worth every bead of perspiration to appreciate the natural, relaxed beauty on a warm summer afternoon.

To establish successfully the ground should be as infertile as possible so that the wildflowers don't have to compete with the meadow grass. If using an area which has been used for planting previously you may need to remove 10cm or so and replace with subsoil. Local seed is always an advantage and in Scotland we are very fortunate to have Scotia Seeds based in Brechin who travel far and wide to obtain seed from local areas near to us. The chosen seed will depend on the soil type and the amount of moisture and light levels the area requires. Remember that if it is a butterfly haven you seek then you need a area in full sun. The meadow is a slowly evolving habitat and will require some attention during the first season.

The rewards however far outweigh the workload and each year will bring a different emphasis on individual plants depending on which species set seed most successfully the previous year. The first year's growth will need to be cut twice if the area was seeded in the early spring; a cut in



Plant wildflowers in your garden and watch the wildlife arrive! Perennial wildflower meadow Boath House

June and then a final one in late summer/early autumn once the seed has set, thereafter once a year in early autumn. A scythe is the best tool to use and the hay can be dried and then raked off a few days later. The hay must be removed in order to reduce the nutrition in the soil.

A pond of any description is useful in a garden but one built specifically for wildlife will attract a larger and more varied number of species encouraging them to breed and take up residence in your garden. The best position for a pond if your garden is on a gradient is at the lowest point as the water will naturally feed into it. A lined pond will have to have the sides formed into a slight slope to allow amphibians, birds and small mammals to clamber up and down safely and also allow marginal plants to thrive in the less deep water. The deepest part of the pond should be at least 900mm in order to keep algae from forming, a straw bale submersed can help rid the pond of unwanted bloom. In time of less rainfall you may need to top up the pond with water that has evaporated, a pump shouldn't be necessary for aeration if the correct amount of oxygenating plants are in place, at least half the pond should have leaf cover.

The best time to plant a pond is in late spring or early summer, include plants for shallow water, margins, deep

Recommended books for wildlife gardening

How to make a Wildlife Garden by Chris Baines. Revised and updated for the BBC series, *Charlie's Wildlife Gardens* ISBN 0 7112 1711 4

Making a Wildflower Meadow by Pam Lewis, the maker of the iconic Sticky Wicket garden. ISBN 0 7112 2133 2

Gardens to visit in May and June

Look out for the numerous private and public gardens open under the Scotland's Open Garden Scheme this summer – www.scotlandsgardens.org

Gardening Scotland June 1–3 at the Royal Highland Centre, Edinburgh – www.gardeningscotland.com

Chelsea Flower Show May 22–26 at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, London – www.rhs.org.uk/Shows-Events/RHS-Chelsea-Flower-Show/2012

Chelsea Fringe May 19–June 10. A new festival of flowers, gardens and gardening across London – www.chelseafringe.com

water such as lilies or other plants with floating leaves as well as much-needed oxygenators. Do watch out for invasive species which tend to colonise especially in areas near waterways such as streams and rivers. Autumn is the best time for any maintenance work to be carried out such as dividing plants and removing unwanted debris. Watch out for the inhabitants and allow time for them to find a new habitat before destroying the waste.

If meadows and ponds just don't push your buttons or you are too restricted with space, a border planted with a variety of perennials, trees and shrubs can encourage wildlife to linger longer. If you grow plants that can be left all winter and cut back in the early spring, not only will you regain more structure in the border but you will provide the inhabitants with valuable shelter and warmth.

A prairie type of planting with a strong emphasis on grasses and herbaceous perennials will last all through the year. An annual cut back in March and it will be off with great gusto again in April.



Prairie planting borders include stipa, miscanthus, calamagrostis, eupatorium and verbena – Boath House walled garden



Planting trees encourages birds with their seeds and fruit and native hedges provide food and shelter that will reward you with nests of wildlife.

The worrying demise of the honey bee and empty hives puts much more pressure on our other pollinating insects and birds. Nectar plants should be included in borders wherever possible to encourage our much needed pollinators to do their job.

For those who are not married to a lawn fanatic an alternative to the grass lawn is to plant a flowering lawn which not only provides a wildlife haven, as it needs little attention, but will also allow more colour and contrast to the garden.

Instead of cutting the lawn, you could be sitting in the hammock, watching and listening and just being very lazy...

Mowing the lawn is getting expensive if you use a petrol mower, it needs cutting every 10 days or so in the height of the season; lawn chemicals, feeds and moss killer are toxic and don't those grass cuttings pile up!

Wildflower lawns are easy to sow, they need only one cut a year, or four cuts to keep them very short like a lawn and they can be sown or laid as a ready made turf.

It goes without saying that in order to preserve the fragile balance in our natural gardens we need to keep as organic as possible in our horticultural endeavours. The use of herbicides and pesticides does not sit happily with a wildlife garden and ultimately restricts the diversity of species.

Why not start a diary of wildlife that you spot in the garden this summer and you'll be amazed at the amount and the variety that you have encouraged once you get up close and personal. Get the kids involved, many first wildlife experiences are in the garden, remember being flat on your stomach watching the insects close up.

Bask in the knowledge that as gardeners we are an essential component in our country's all so sensitive ecosystems. For thousands of years (since Neolithic farmers cleared forests) we have provided wildlife for both resident and visiting species and there is now greater need for us to reconnect with our natural habitat than ever before.

CONTACT WENDY

If you are interested in finding out more information regarding planting and design of wildlife gardens or you wish to find out more about the gardens at Boath House please contact Wendy at WM Garden Design: info@wmgardendesign.com

Low maintenance home for hundreds of varieties of wildlife. Pictured iris, gunnera, Rodgersia, primula and water lilies Bog garden – Boath House, Auldearn

