

Wildlife Friendly Gardening for Small Gardens. A talk - Claire Draper

Biosphere Festival, 29-30 June 2024

Wildlife needs...

Food
Shelter
Somewhere to reproduce
Somewhere to raise young or to grow to reach adulthood

Small garden features...

Grass, flowerbeds and nettle patches
Hedges, shrubs, climbers and trees
Fences, walls and sheds
Ponds, waterways and washing-up bowls

Wildlife plants...

Green spaces for wildlife! It is All About The Green! All wildlife must have plants - the right plants grown in the right places can meet their needs for survival and there is a plant for every situation and any plant can offer at least shelter for wildlife. Wildlife needs to complete their own lifecycles and all of the life cycles rely on the existence of plants to support them.

Many plants and planting arrangements in a garden can serve as habitats for wildlife – some flower providing food, some fruit. The habitats that exist can be identified by looking at the plants in the garden – is there a hedge or adjoining shrubs providing a wildlife corridor, are there sticks and leaves for hedgehogs, is there a tree for birds to use, is there ground cover and shade for invertebrates and amphibians, what creatures could live in this space? When this is established then run with it, encourage and use complimentary wildlife friendly plants to meet as many of the wildlife needs as possible, create a variable mini ecosystem, it will be what works! Add trees, add shrubs, add climbers, add flowers, add grasses – add plants you and your garden can cope with. Use native specimens to support native wildlife and other plants of benefit to UK wildlife. Three tiers of planting, ground level, mid-level and top tier allow for a good range of wildlife habitats serving a wide range of wildlife species and can be achieved in small spaces and town gardens, careful choice of plants has to be made due to the limited number of actual plants that can be used but complimentary plants growing at each height will achieve the desired result. The list of available plants is endless and there are so many variables as to which wildlife friendly plant would be suitable where. Seek advice as necessary and in any event add wildlife friendly plants if there is space or if not then consider swapping out the plants for those that are. Start by establishing what you have, what you want and what works for existing and additional wildlife. And if buying new plants visit an established outdoor nursery not only ask about the plants but to see which flowering plants on display have attracted the pollinators and then buy those!

Small garden wildlife friendly gardening tips...

Green spaces for wellbeing! People need plants – a huge calming sensation is often experienced when looking at plants and green spaces – trees, lawns, a meadow or a landscape. It is All About The Green!

Identify the garden, existing considerations, the space, the aspect – heavily populated with people, pets or pigeons sunny/shady, dry/wet, clay/chalk, windy, overlooked, etc. Determine which wildlife habitats are present, which are effective and which could be developed? Could more be added? Is it possible to create an environment which will meet as many wildlife needs as possible? Food, shelter and lifecycle opportunity... Is it possible to join habitats together to bridge the wildlife stations in your garden with the wildlife stations in the gardens of your neighbours? Go for it! Get started and do something, anything to help. Target effort into working with what you've got - aspect, existing plants and considerations, budget, recyclable materials, skill sets, plant budget and knowledge - and inclination!

Wildlife wins...

Add habitat piles! Places to rest, nest, feed, stay dry, stay warm or cold and evade predators. Stick piles, leaf piles, rock piles, vegetation piles and wood piles. Piles should be placed where they can be retained. Make piles with what you have to hand – old wood, broken bricks, grass, compostable garden waste etc. Recycled materials could be made into a feature in a flower bed or tucked under a hedge. Rake the leaves off the lawn and pile them elsewhere. Wooden stumps in sunny/dappled shade can provide homes for bees etc, in the shade they provide homes for woodlice etc. Rocks in the sun can provide a place to bask, homes for slow worms etc, in the shade they can provide homes for toads etc. Open compost bins provide homes for invertebrates which are food for birds and amphibians and can also attract slow worms and hibernating hedgehogs. The opportunities are endless!

Provide homes! Nesting boxes, insect hotels, hedgehog houses, frog pots etc – there are a wealth of wildlife homes available and these can be put under things, in things and fitted to walls, fences and sheds. All need to be purchased and installed with regard for available habitats in the immediate area and the natural behaviour of the wildlife for which they are designed. Add insect hotels at the correct height for the insects they are for, have them at a variety of heights at in different locations. Add a plate of water on the floor in the garden for creatures. Add a birdbath and nesting boxes, not where easily accessible by cats, but everywhere else as different birds need different nesting arrangements in different aspects. And sit back then sit back and wait - the birds will use them once they have been there for a year or two and have been determined as safe to use!

Plant a tree! Tricky with limited space but even a very small tree, grown in a pot, especially one which flowers and produces berries or fruit, is a wildlife habitat in itself. A light canopy provides resting space for birds, a dense canopy provides a place to nest. A native flowering tree supports native pollinators and berries and fruit are a food source for native wildlife. Plant the right tree in the right place and it may persist and an established tree can support a huge number of creatures.

There are so many trees and cultivars available, all with different growing habits and requirements and other considerations such as ‘Groups’ pertaining to cross pollination and many trees are unsuitable for town or small garden aspects. It is though often possible to squeeze a small tree into a small space and a good place to start is to opt for a native specimen, a self-fertile fruit tree or a tree specimen known to be of benefit to UK wildlife – a tree that will grow in the conditions on offer with regard for eventual size and shape. Seek advice directly from staff at a nursery when buying a tree to ensure what is bought is a good fit!

Plant a hedge! Create a wildlife corridor so wildlife can move around the garden. This increases the possibility of wildlife finding advantageous conditions for a complete lifecycle whilst increasing the potential for creating adjoining wildlife habitats. What a win!

Incorporate edible plants to create a garden buffet! Why not add edible perennial plants to the garden – trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, herbs. There are so many to choose from – an apple tree, sage for a sunny spot and if left to go to flower is loved by bees, blackcurrant bushes as an edible hedge. Select what works with the aspect with regard for existing habitats and good luck beating the birds to the currants!

Add a wildlife pond! Or a mini-wildlife pond. Potentially a great biodiversity hotspot and considered to be one of the best additions to a wildlife garden. Plan what pond and where and consider long term feasibility. Below are links to great websites if looking to put in a pond or create a mini-wildlife pond in an upcycled container! And of course the best place to start is with plants - submerged, floating and emergent - three tiers!

Allow some space to be completely undisturbed! When farming the ground is left to fallow to rest the soil, when vegetable growing the crops are rotated to maintain the appropriate nutrient levels, wildlife gardening must allow wildlife the opportunity and space to meet their needs and so successfully complete their lifecycles. Manage gardens with regard for wildlife, in stages and with restraint. Trim hedges outside of the nesting season. If renovating a hedge cut back half one year and the other half the following year to provide shelter for insects as well as nesting cover for birds while the renovation takes place. If maintaining a lawn reduce mowing and rework some over to a spring or summer flower meadow providing long grass ground cover and food for pollinators. Leave turning the compost bays. Resist deadheading beneficial flowering plants, allow them self-seed and spread. If they have done so they may continue to do so. Avoid double-digging soil. Encourage a patch of nettles to grow at the end of the garden or brambles behind the shed year in year out. Avoid over cultivation – once wildlife friendly plants and habitats are in place in the garden best leave them be, with any luck, over time, they will become populated with wildlife. All wildlife habitats are important, no matter how small, especially when they can cater for every aspect of need – keep squeezing them in! And if we created enough little habitats they will join-up and start to provide really useful, viable spaces for wildlife. We really do all need to create wildlife habitats to make it possible for wildlife to exist, repopulate and thrive! And we can all find some peace on the way when looking at the green plants and spaces – it is All About The Green!

Further Resources...

The RHS website, an oracle of information on plants and habitats and contains details as to how create different habitats for wildlife.

The Natural History Museum website is a fantastic source of wildlife information including directions on how to make a log pile, pond habitats, plants and animals and Eleven Ways to Help Birds in Towns and Cities.

Earthwatch – Naturehood supply, on donation, the most excellent, simple, user friendly and inspiring pond guide ‘The Little Book of Ponds’.

The Wildlife Trusts website contains all sorts of information relating to wildlife including instructions on how to create a wildlife pond and The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust website provides instruction on how to create a mini-wildlife pond in an upcycled container. Nice!

To register an interest in related, upcoming talks and workshops please leave a message FAO Claire at email@allaboutthegreen.co.uk.