

Wildlife gardening – some notes

Here are 10 key elements to a wildlife friendly area:

1. Don't use herbicides and pesticides or peat-based composts
2. An unvaried environment e.g. a closely mown lawn or a paved area will offer little of value to wildlife and may need even more maintenance.
3. Prioritise native plants as these have evolved alongside native wildlife and will provide more opportunities to benefit native animals than ornamental introduced species.
4. Choose single flowers rather than complex double flowers
5. Different stages of many species have different requirements e.g., butterfly and moth caterpillars eat plants, many of the adults feed on flower nectar and not necessarily from the same species. Try to create a varied mix of species rather than a few individual plants that might be of use – “A community not a café”
6. Think of the food chain – getting in insects that feed on nectar as adults and leaves as larvae provides a food source for carnivorous insects and other invertebrates, all of these can provide foods for birds and animals. These animals can provide food for larger animals and birds.
7. Grow appropriate plants, some may be invasive or cause damage if they spread, some may need more room than you can provide, some may need sun and you only have shade.
8. Try to produce an environment that is attractive to people as well as wildlife, the better something looks the more people will be persuaded of its value to them as well as the wildlife.
9. Try to provide good cover to offer protection – wood piles, bug hotels, compost heaps
10. Don't neglect the value of hard surfaces and buildings – they can provide some good opportunities for wildlife.

These principles apply whether you have a small border, a few pots or a large garden. The range of possible species is almost infinite, here are some examples of groups that you might attract

Plant Feeders – butterflies, moths, hoverflies, bees, some beetles

Predators – dragonflies, some beetles, wasps, spiders, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals

The great thing is that creating an environment that is good for one group will also provide an environment suitable for many groups. For instance, a butterfly friendly area will also be a bee and hoverfly friendly area.

When planning a wildlife garden don't leap straight in – take a little while to see what you have before you start –

1. Will there be the resource to maintain what we are planning to do?
2. What is the balance of light and shade through the day?
3. Are there any plants already in place that can be used or moved appropriately?
4. Is there a water supply easily available?
5. What will be the public perception of the changes?

Wild Plants

Alder Buckthorn – a small rather anonymous shrub which will attract Brimstone butterflies to lay eggs on the leaf buds and young leaves, the caterpillars will eat the leaves. Would need pruning to keep in a manageable shape.

Birds Foot Trefoil – a low growing yellow flowered plant. Will grow in lawns and stand cutting. Attracts many insects and is the foodplant for caterpillars of the Common Blue butterfly and common species of day flying Burnet moths.

Cranesbill and Storksbill – low growing plants with pink flowers, favouring disturbed ground, the larval foodplant for the Brown Argus butterfly.

Tips for making your garden a haven for butterflies, moths and other insects

Creeping thistle – The purple flowers are very attractive to butterflies and other insects. The seeds to birds. But it is deep rooted and spreads rapidly and can form large monocultural patches.

Dandelion- grows well in lawns and the yellow daisy flowers are a good source of nectar of many spring flying butterflies. Many moth species' caterpillars also feed on it. Easily spreads.

Garlic Mustard – white flowered, when bruised smells of garlic. Very attractive to Orange Tip butterflies, who will lay eggs its flower heads and its caterpillars eat the seed pods. Spreads readily.

Grasses – many wild grasses are used by the caterpillars of a wide range of moths and the “Brown” and Skipper groups of butterflies. Lawns may grow out to feature them but equally may feature hard wearing rye grasses that are of little interest to insects. A reasonable patch is needed to be effective. Should only be cut once a year in late summer.

Ivy- climber, valuable if large to flower as an autumn nectar source for many insects and as a caterpillar food source for the Holly Blue. Insects will also hibernate in its leaves. What it grows up needs careful consideration.

Knapweed- Several species of grassland plants with purple flowers that are very attractive to insects during the summer. Seed heads last through winter and are a good source of seed for birds. There are also some garden varieties.

Ladies Smock – pink flowered, likes moist to damp soil. Very attractive to Orange Tip butterflies, which will lay eggs on its flower heads and its caterpillars eat the seed pods. Spreads readily.

Oxeye Daisy – grows quickly in disturbed ground with large white daisy flowers that attract many insects. Close up the scent explains its attraction for flies. Several species of moth feed on its roots. Spread quickly but is often overwhelmed by other species after some years. Marguerites are a garden equivalent.

Sheep's Sorrell – medium sized member of Dock family with red flowers. The foodplant of the Small Copper's caterpillars.

Stinging nettles- the foodplant for caterpillars of many species of moth and the Comma, Red Admiral, Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies. Needs to be a large sunny patch and cutting mid-season to ensure supply of new green shoots. Not that attractive and obviously can sting unpleasantly.

Teasel- Needs some space to grow with big purple flower heads. Only longer tongued butterflies and moths can feed from it. Dead seed heads are a valuable autumn and winter seed source for birds.

Yarrow – a medium sized white flowered perennial that is an attractive nectar source for many insects. There are also garden varieties with yellow and pink flowers often called by the scientific name *Achillea*.

Garden Plants

Aubretia- Easy to grow trailing plant whose pink or purple flowers are attractive to spring butterflies. Needs cutting back after flowering to keep a good shape and bushy.

Buddleia- The “Butterfly Bush”. Purple, red or white flowers on a shrub that can grow 2m in a year and can seed freely. Likes dry conditions and will grow in mortar so needs an eye keeping on young plants. Should be pruned right back into dead wood early in the year to keep under control. Of no use for larval stages but insects love the flowers.

Calendula- Pot Marigold. Large orange daisy flowers and easy to grow and will spread. Excellent nectar source for insects.

Cosmos – Pink or white large flowered daisies with attractive foliage. Different varieties can grow from 50cm to 2 metres tall. A good source of nectar through summer to frosts.

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Hebe - several varieties of shrubs with purple, white or pink flowers, early and late in the year. Attractive to insects. Needs pruning but generally well behaved.

Honesty - Purple flowers and oval seed pods. Very attractive to Orange Tip butterflies, who will lay eggs on its flower heads and its caterpillars eat the seed pods. Seeds well but not invasive.

Lavender - Woody shrubs with aromatic purple flowers in late summer. Needs hard cutting back to prevent woodiness and straggling. Attractive to many insects particularly bees and the white butterflies.

Mahonia - A yellow flowered evergreen shrub which tends to sucker. The yellow flowers are a good nectar source during late autumn, winter and early spring.

Marjoram (Oregano) - Purple flowered herb that dies back in winter. An absolute magnet for Gatekeeper butterflies in July and many other insects.

Michaelmas Daisy - Clump forming purple flowered daisies that comes in many varieties and flower in the early autumn. The smaller flowered species can attract Small Copper butterflies in particular

Nasturtium - Easily grown from seed, trails for 2-3 metres with orange and yellow flowers attractive to insects. Large White caterpillars enjoy the leaves.

Purple Toadflax - Seeds itself readily but has attractive foliage and purple flowers, can grow anywhere and the foodplant of the attractive caterpillar of the once rare Toadflax Brocade moth.

Sedum – There are many varieties of these fleshy, dry ground loving plants. Many are invasive and not recommended but the pink flowered Autumn Joy variety of Sedum spectabile is a good autumnal nectar source.

Sweet Rocket - White fragrant flowers. Very attractive to Orange Tip butterflies, who will lay eggs its flower heads and its caterpillars eat the seed pods. Seeds well but not invasive.

Thyme – purple or white flowered herb. The flowers are attractive to many insects. Likes dry conditions and easy to grow. Needs cutting back at end of summer to prevent it getting woody.

Valerian – Pink, red or white plants that flower from late spring onwards. Spreads from seed and can get woody if left to long in one place.

Verbascum - There are both wild and cultivated varieties of this tall flower with large hairy leaves. Usually yellow flowered. The attractive caterpillar of the Mullein moth can demolish a full-grown plant in a few days.

Verbena bonariensis- The tall purple flowered plant is attractive in late summer to butterflies. Tend to die off and re seed close by.

Viburnum- The winter flowering varieties of this group of shrubs are another good source of out of season nectar

Structures

Bird boxes - Need to be sited out of hottest sun and away from opportunities for predators to get easy access. No advantage to buying fancy, decorative, painted boxes. Check they have not been treated with inappropriate preservatives.

Bug and bee hotels - Containers like bird boxes or built from pallets which contain a variety of tubes and crevices that are supposed to offer hibernation places for many insects as well as prebuilt homes for hole living insects, particularly bees. They tend to concentrate a lot of creatures in a small space and may offer a cafeteria for predators. No advantage to buying fancy, decorative, painted boxes. Check they have not been treated with inappropriate preservatives.

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Sheds and greenhouses - Hibernating insects will seek refuge inside, particularly Ladybirds and Peacock and Small Tortoiseshell butterflies.

Walls and Fences - Mosses, algae and lichens will grow on these vertical surfaces and are fed on by a surprising number of insects. Many insects such as butterflies will suspend their chrysalises from these surfaces.

Hedges- best varieties for insects are those with attractive flowers such as Blackthorn, Hawthorn, Privet or Pyracanthus, which grow quickly, and all have good berries for birds. Many moth caterpillars will feed on them and they can provide good sites for bird nests. All will need clipping to shape to keep them compact and bushy. Avoid Leyland Cypress and Cherry laurel which are difficult to control and have little value for wildlife.

Planting

Meadow Mats – Laid like a roll of turf but they contain a mixture of grasses and wildlife friendly plants. The ground needs to be well prepared with topsoil removed to prevent the growth of existing weeds that will out-compete the slower growing plants in the mats. Just search for a phrase like “meadow mat suppliers”

Plants – Available from many garden centres and specialist nurseries. People’s gardens can be a good source of seeds, cuttings and plants. It might also be a way to get community involvement. Please don’t take plants from the wild.

Seeds – Basic mixes available from anywhere that sell seeds such as pound shops, supermarkets and garden centres. Specialist suppliers sell more adventurous plants and mixes online. Just search for a phrase like “wildlife seed suppliers”

Wilding - In a small space this is not as dramatic as it might sound. If you have a lawn just let it grow and see what comes up. It will not be as varied as a purpose sown mat, but it is cheap and labour saving. However, if your lawn is hard wearing rye grass you will just get a lot of long hard-wearing rye grass. If your lawn looks patchy and bare you may find something more interesting appears.

Some further sources of information.

Wildlife gardening is now a very hot topic and many organisations offer information and advice, here are a few relevant links, there are many more. There are also numerous books available.

BBC Wildlife <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/how-to/wildlife-gardening/how-to-start-a-wildlife-garden/>

Buglife <https://www.buglife.org.uk/activities-for-you/wildlife-gardening>

Butterfly Conservation <https://butterfly-conservation.org/how-you-can-help/get-involved/gardening>

Royal Horticultural Society <https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/encourage-wildlife-to-your-garden>

RSPB <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/>

Wildlife Trusts <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/gardening>