

Principles of Designing Gardens for Wildlife

Contributed by Richard Burkmar from Space for Wildlife

It is a mistake to think of wildlife gardens as being fundamentally different to other gardens. Instead, we should consider the term 'wildlife gardening' in a similar way to 'organic gardening' in that it describes a set of principles and horticultural techniques that can be applied to any garden.

The four cornerstones To make your garden as attractive as possible to animals you must make provision for

1. food,
2. water,
3. shelter,
4. breeding places.

By considering these four 'cornerstones' when thinking about the requirements of particular animals, we can build up an overall picture of the kinds of micro-habitats which need to be incorporated into the fabric of the garden.

Relax! Relaxing your attitude towards nature is the single greatest thing you can do to make your garden more attractive to wildlife. Wildlife can be accommodated even in a very formal garden, it just requires bucket loads of imagination, ingenuity and a relaxed attitude towards working with nature.

Water features and wildlife Probably the easiest way to attract wildlife to a garden is to provide some sort of permanent body of water: it almost guarantees success. From a full 'wildlife pond' to something as simple as a bucket sunk into the ground, any permanent water will boost the biodiversity of your garden.

Nooks and crannies Most wild animals that we attract to our gardens are invertebrates ('mini-beasts'). Others animals, like birds and mammals, often come into our gardens looking for invertebrates to eat. As well as providing plants to attract pollen and nectar-loving insects, we can also provide spaces for invertebrates to shelter and breed. Often the spaces they require are very small: think in terms of nooks and crannies. By providing nooks and crannies - out of sight if need be (e.g. under a deck or shed) - we can do a lot to boost biodiversity in the garden.

Native plants You do not have to use lots of native plants to be a wildlife gardener, but there is no doubt that it is easier to attract wildlife if you incorporate some. Native trees and shrubs, in particular, have been shown to support a lot of native wildlife. Native plants can be particularly useful in those awkward corners of the garden where little else seems to grow.

Nectar bonanza As many animals and plants are found in every square metre of the average British garden as in some of the richest natural habitats in the world. The diversity of insects that occur in gardens owes a lot to the rich supplies of nectar and pollen to be found there. You can maximise the effects of this nectar bonanza by following these simple guidelines.

- Use a range of species to maximise the flowering period.
- Include early bloomers - early spring is a critical time for many insects.
- Don't worry about using non-natives - they often exceed natives in terms of their nectar and pollen production.
- Go for simple flowers where pollen and nectar are easily accessible - avoid double flowers which are sterile or are not easy for the insects to tackle.
- Include plenty of species where the nectar and pollen is available near the surface of the flower.

Service stations As well as providing nectar and pollen for insects by planting the appropriate plants, we can also provide food and water for other animals. Any accessible fresh water will be used for drinking and bathing by a large number of animals, especially if kept free of ice in winter. Nowadays there are also a huge range of commercially available food stuffs and feeders for garden wildlife, particularly birds. Once animals are used to finding food in your garden, they can be depended on to visit regularly.

Organic gardening Organic and wildlife gardening techniques should be considered as complementary. In nature, pest species rarely reach epidemic proportions because the interdependencies between thousands of species form stable ecosystems. Pests are usually a problem in situations where biodiversity has been deliberately reduced, e.g. in arable farmland where pests are poisoned. Because a wildlife garden promotes biodiversity, it will tend to suffer less from infestations of particular pest species: there are usually enough natural predators around to keep them in check without resorting to chemicals.

About the author, Richard Burkmar

Space for Nature, a website for anyone interested in the wildlife in their garden as well as for gardeners looking for information on how to help and encourage wildlife. It includes projects to carry out at home, picture galleries, and a diary that provides ideas for what to do and what you might expect to see in a typical garden at a particular time of year.