

Biodiversity on your doorstep

There are fifteen million gardens in the UK covering an estimated 2 million acres of land. Although most gardens contain many non-native species and 'artificial' elements, traditionally considered to be of little benefit to wildlife, they more than make up for this by virtue of the huge variety of habitats they contain which are capable of supporting a large range of native insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. The dramatic decline in more natural habitats over the past fifty years has led to gardens becoming essential havens for all sorts of wildlife and a valuable tool in conserving biodiversity.

Not only do gardens provide vital habitat requirements for many species, they also play a crucial role in connecting the remaining areas of unspoilt habitat. These remaining areas are often quite isolated from each other, and species such as insects, amphibians and mammals could not travel between them to look for mates or new food sources if they did not have stepping stones along the way where they could find food and shelter. Gardens can provide these stepping stones if properly looked after.



Hedgehogs – very cute and excels at slug control!



Slow worms – completely harmless (they aren't even a snake, just a lizard without legs!) and attracted to warm dark places like compost heaps.

On top of all this, gardens provide most peoples main point of contact with nature. Many people, and especially children, do not have the free and open access to the countryside that, in days gone by, would have given them the chance to experience nature first hand. Anyone who has seen a child entranced by some encounter they've had with nature, would agree that those experiences are a hugely important part of a child's development and can change that child for life.

So what can we do?

There are a huge number of things that you can do to make your garden more welcoming for wildlife, from something as simple as putting up a bird feeder that provides much needed nourishment for birds during the winter months, to major projects such as building a pond which provides a wetland habitat for frogs, toads, dragonflies and other insects. For a very small amount of effort you can get huge returns in terms of the enjoyment of seeing wildlife on your doorstep – even if you only have a balcony, you can still provide bird food during the winter months. Below is a list of ideas to get you started:

- Size isn't everything! You don't have to spend hours each week completely redesigning your garden to improve its value for wildlife. There are many quick, easy and non-disruptive things you can do:
 - If you have decking, then fill some of the space underneath with rocks and logs – you won't even be able to see that they're there, but they will provide a marvellous shelter for everything from insects to hedgehogs.

- If you don't have decking, simply create a log pile in one corner of your garden. (Logs are available for free from the Council Depot on Court Road between 10-3 on the last Sunday of each month).
- Alternatively tie some lengths of hollow cane of various widths together and hang them horizontally on a wall or fence – they will provide an ideal home for insects such as solitary bees - they are harmless!
- Feed the birds – unfortunately bird food is no longer tuppence a bag! However, there is no need to buy specially prepared bird food – dried fruit, cooked rice, oatmeal, grated cheese, baked potatoes, leftover pastry and even rotten fruit can all be used. Where possible try and place the food in variety of locations as different birds have different preferences but ensure it is far enough away from any bushes which could contain the neighbourhood cat!
- Feed the birds deluxe! In particularly cold weather you could always 'bake' your birds a cake. Simply mix one part of the food suggested above with two parts melted fat, allow to solidify, then serve! Or if you are feeling generous you could buy them some seed (sunflower seeds, nyjer seeds, or grated peanuts are best), but make sure you remove any nylon mesh that comes with the seed as this can trap and break birds feet.



The Greater Spotted Woodpecker – you can attract this bird by wedging peanuts into the gaps in a post and they will come and dig them out!



Chaffinch, a common garden visitor



Two Blue Tits and Great Tit enjoying a bird feeder

- Make your garden a haven for insects – not only are some of them beautiful (e.g. butterflies and beetles), they also provide a food source for birds and mammals:
 - Go organic! Stop using pesticides and other forms of chemicals – they are not selective and will often kill off the natural predators of the very pest you are trying to get rid of. There are a host of organic pest control methods described online – try some of them and watch your garden flourish!



Natural Pest Control – the Garden Spider!

- Go wild! While very few people would consider a completely overgrown garden to be attractive, a perfectly manicured one can be very dull for wildlife. Try adopting a minimum intervention strategy on a small part of your garden and observe the results. (Many so called ‘weeds’, especially ivy, are excellent food sources for wildlife).



A sunflower – not a native plant, but an unrivalled source of seed to feed hungry birds during the winter months.

- Pick your plants carefully – try and include as many native plants in your garden as you can because they support a much wider range of species. Go for plants which are rich in pollen or produce large numbers of berries and seeds as these will provide valuable food for insects, birds and mammals.



The Small Tortoiseshell Butterfly, one of the many beautiful visitors that a pollen-rich garden will attract

- Variety is the spice of life! Make your garden as diverse as possible – different species prefer different conditions (e.g. sunny lawns are good for worms and thrushes, shady bushes are good for insects and shy birds like wrens, pollen-rich flowers are good for butterflies and ponds attract dragonflies and amphibians) so by having as wide a range of habitats as possible, you will attract the maximum amount of wildlife.
- Be adventurous! If you fancy a bigger project, create a pond in your garden. No other feature will attract more species than one of these – frogs, toads, dragonflies, birds, newts – you name them, they all love wet areas. There is loads of advice on the web and in your local library on how to create a great pond for wildlife. Do a little research, then grab your spade!



The “Common” Frog is heavily reliant on gardens ponds

This is only a small selection of the hundreds of ways that you can improve your garden for wildlife. If none of these take your fancy (or you’ve done them all already!) then have a look on the internet – there are loads of good sites out there. A particularly good site can be found at http://www.english-nature.org.uk/Nature_In_The_Garden (English Nature are the sister organisation of the Countryside Council for Wales). From here you can download some superb leaflets on all kinds of wildlife which give you information on the species and details of how you can encourage them in your garden. If you don’t have access to the internet then you can ring English Nature on 01733 455101 and they will send you the leaflets for free.

Matthew Hamilton

All photographs: Richard Marks