

Creating a haven FOR WILDLIFE

Early August brings an abundance of butterflies to the English garden, a year-round place of succour for a variety of insects and mammals. What better way to bring nature to our doorstep? ▶

CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN Whilst native plants are best for wildlife, many cultivated plants also attract butterflies and bees, as at this Hampton Court Show Garden. A dovecote lures larger birds into the garden, encouraging them to feed and breed. The Dovecote Company has a wide range of wall or post models. Ladybirds and their young larvae help to control garden pests, such as greenfly and blackfly. Feed hedgehogs tinned pet food to help them prepare for hibernation and survive winter. The Peacock butterfly is one of the many native species. The first National Trust Love Butterflies Weekend will take place from 6-7 August, when they are at their peak. www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lovebutterflies





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Wildflowers attract any number of birds, bees and other insects. A colourful meadow effect is created by combining the vivid reds of Red Flax, the blues of the Californian bluebell and the golden flowers of goldfields. Bumblebees and honey bees buzz from flower to flower, ensuring that fruit, vegetables and flowers are successfully pollinated; lavender is a particular favourite. A simple beehive is both a busy honey factory and a much-needed home for young bees. There is plenty of support available on how to get started from the BBKA. Robins evoke images of winter, an important reminder that wildlife needs support throughout the year, especially in wintertime when food is scarce. Give regular thought to the availability of both food and water. At this year's Chelsea Flower Show, Stephen Hall won silver for Fever Trees Tree House Garden. Perfect for even a small pocket of the garden, it has all the elements of a successful wildlife garden: water, a bird house, log stacks and stones, as well as lots of natural plantings of native wildflowers, herbs, shrubs and trees.

From butterflies and bats, to inquisitive foxes, visitors to your garden can be both varied and surprising. There is such joy in witnessing a hedgehog gently nudging its path through autumn leaves, or spying the distinctive, white-spotted wings of the Painted Lady butterfly softly quivering among the summer blooms. There can also be no better way to introduce children to nature and ignite their interest than by seeing it first hand in their own back garden.

Recent farming practices have forced British wildlife out of the countryside and into our gardens, yet many such spaces fail to meet the basic needs of fleeing wildlife. Sparrow populations have halved since the 1970s and starlings reduced by 75 per cent; song thrushes, robins and even blackbirds are diminishing, while butterfly species are dwindling and bee populations are seriously threatened. In England, there is more garden space than nature reserves, where we can create a better environment for our wildlife, provide a safe pocket to breed and shelter, somewhere to forage throughout the year, and offer insects a feast of nectar and pollen.

BUTTERFLIES AND BEES

Britain has 59 indigenous varieties of butterfly, and native plants and wildflowers provide more nectar than hybrid or cultivated plants. The RHS *Perfect for Pollinators* campaign, lists nearly 300 such trees, climbers, annuals and perennials, including early season flowers, hellebores, snowdrops and crocuses, essential to hungry nectar-seekers coming out of hibernation, while asters, salvias and ivies prepare them for winter hibernation.

Specific plants attract certain species of butterfly. Painted Ladies dine on thistles, burdock and stinging nettles; Holly Blues inevitably on holly, ivy, bramble and gorse, while be sure to plant nasturtiums and wild mignonette to lure Large Whites away from cabbages. Moths favour lighter coloured, night-visible and night-scented flowers.

In winter, butterflies and moths hibernate in decaying foliage, old pots and quiet nooks and crannies, so leave them undisturbed and spring clean your garden rather than autumn tidy. Butterfly houses and supplementary food also increase winter survival.

A NATURAL HOME

Encourage resident bees to nest and multiply and possibly overwinter by providing a 'bee hotel', made from gathered hollow stems, snapped bamboo and old flower stalks. You can build or buy combined bug boxes to house bees, ladybirds and lacewings. Consider, too, a hive for honey bees and help colonies threatened by the devastating varroa mite, harsh winters and persistent use of insecticides.



Once you remove honey from the hive you must provide a winter feed substitute, generally a sugary syrup, until spring nectar is in good supply.

Bumblebees also need a little help. They can be introduced in colonies and a 'Beepol' box comes with a queen and 40-50 worker bees, with a viewing panel to watch the colony develop.

A wildflower meadow is a great catch-all for butterflies, bees and other insects. Naturalise a small, sunny site by planting with selected native wild grasses and flowers, including Ragged Robins, Cowslips, Red Campion, Common Sorrel, Oxeye daisies, thistles and even nettles. These are all loved by Tortoiseshell, Peacock, Comma and Red Admiral butterflies. In autumn, plant plugs or sow seeds and cut the following summer's end when the seed has set. Mow the following spring, pre-flowering, raking away cuttings to deplete the area of nutrients, as butterflies prefer it lean. Within two years the meadow will buzz with activity.

A 'living wildlife roof' is a space-saving alternative to a meadow. To be successful, roofs must be completely waterproof with good drainage. Sedums, wild flowers and herbs seem to thrive, requiring occasional watering and an annual feed. Include stones and bits of old wood in the design to maximise habit diversity.

FEATHERED FRIENDS

Native plants, shrubs and trees, provide the best food for wild birds, as well as shelter and nesting sites. The RSPB also suggests year-round supplementary bird feeding, such as kitchen scraps of breadcrumbs, cooked rice, potatoes, fat and fruit, nuts and seeds ▶





to help them to rear their young and survive harsh winters. Ensure, however, tables and feeders are safe from predators and positioned where you can enjoy watching the many different winged visitors.

Encourage 'natural' nesting sites in the garden; wrens and blackbirds nest in honeysuckle- and ivy-clad walls. Alternatively, hang or build safe, secure and weatherproof bird-nesting boxes; the entrance hole dimensions will dictate the occupants. Locate these out of direct sun, to avoid overheating newly-hatched chicks, and tilt forward to shed rainwater.

FOUR-LEGGED VISITORS

Winter survival is key to small mammals as well as insects. A woodpile, complete with duvet of dry leaves, is an invaluable refuge as well as a possible hedgehog nesting site or breeding ground for slow worms and beetles. Alternatively, conceal a hedgehog box in a quiet corner of the garden protected by ground cover or low growing shrubs. Feed baby hedgehogs with pet food in autumn to increase their chances of surviving hibernation.

WATER SOURCE

Water is a vital element to the livelihood of all garden wildlife and even a simple bird drinking or bathing bath will make a difference. A pond, however, is a real wildlife crowd puller; newts, toads, frogs and dragonflies will all be drawn. The number of countryside ponds has halved over the last 100 years so garden ponds are vital to sustain our water-loving animal and plant species.

Ideally ponds should measure a minimum of 1.2 metres x 1.5 metres and 45cm deep; smaller

quantities of water overheat quickly, harming or distressing pond inhabitants. The ponds need sloping sides to facilitate access and exit, plenty of shallow water and both shelter and platforms afforded by native water-loving plants. Mix native marginal, submerged, floating and oxygenating plants to maximise your wildlife possibilities. Popular pond plants include water forget-me-not leaf, marsh marigold, purple loosestrife, and water mint. Fill new ponds with rainwater and carry out work in the autumn to avoid disturbing breeding cycles. Protect emerging amphibians from predators with some natural cover and planting. A stack of slates or a collection of stones all make useful hiding and hibernation places.

The more diverse you can make your garden, providing both succour and habitat, the greater the wildlife you will cater for. Watch and count the different visitors to your mini sanctuary and enjoy the added vitality you have created in the garden. ■

CLOCKWISE FROM

TOP LEFT This garden has been designed with a bog pond that runs the width of the garden, with low areas so that frogs can get in and out. The diverse planting of water plants, marginals, bordering nectar flowers and shrubs and trees, provides cover for emerging pond creatures and those visiting for a drink. Bug hotels are a great way to encourage a variety of insects to settle in your garden. They can be great fun to make from natural garden finds, too. Water is an essential element in the wildlife garden and a spot to drink and bathe. This simple lily-filled bowl will make a real difference to the number of wildlife visitors attracted to the garden.

Foxgloves are excellent for bees. Their distinctive markings with the spotted throat, act as a 'honey guide', or the equivalent of a sat nav, for bees.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- For details of native plants that attract butterflies and bees visit www.rhs.org.uk/plants. To match favourite butterflies to plants visit www.ukbutterflies.co.uk/foodplants. For varied planting try The Wild Flower Shop Butterfly Collection plug plants www.wildflowershop.co.uk
- A Butterfly house and feeder priced £22.50 is available from www.greengardener.co.uk
- Enjoy making your own bee and bug box with guidance available at www.rspb.org.uk/advic. For a purpose-built hotel, try Kew Gardens Insect Hotel for £20, <http://shop.kew.org>
- The British Beekeepers Association offer help to get started with a bee hive – www.bbka.org.uk. 'Beepol' boxes are available from www.harrodhorticultural.com
- For an instant wildflower garden install 'wild flower turf' available from www.wildflowerturf.co.uk. Ready-made sedum roofing is available from www.enviromat.co.uk and bespoke plantings from www.grassroofcompany.co.uk
- Sparrow and Finch have smart painted bird houses and feeders, priced from £34.95, www.sparrowandfinch.co.uk
- Bats and their roosts are now protected by law. Help to boost populations with a garden bat box, priced £14.25, available from www.arkwildlife.co.uk
- To buy or make a hedgehog box visit www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk