

Ten tips towards a Wildlife Garden

This is a list of the ten most useful and easily achievable ways of bringing wildlife into your garden

1. Provide drinking water. A bird bath at a higher level and a large bowl at ground level will provide drinking water for both birds and mammals such as hedgehog. Clean the bird bath ect out regularly so that pathogens don't build up, and make sure it is always kept full, especially in hot dry weather. An unfrozen water source can be particularly important during cold snaps, as well.
2. Most gardens don't contain the large mature trees where natural nest cavities are found so it can be useful to supplement whatever is in the local area with boxes designed for smaller and larger hole nesting species (tits, robins, starlings etc), and perhaps also specialised boxes for swifts, house martins and swallows, which are all declining in part due to loss of nest sites
3. Provide a food source. This can include bird feeders, but it is important to remember that if you start feeding birds, you shouldn't just stop, especially during the later winter and early spring period when food is scarce, although you can reduce what is on offer. A food source for birds can also include berries, for example rosehips, Amelanchier, Cotoneaster, Berberis, crab apples, Pyracantha, various types of hawthorn, Viburnum, Mahonia, Aronia and cherries; and a nectar source in the form of flowers will draw in insects that birds can feed on.
4. Create habitat piles from rubble and logs, capped with soil and turves. These can be hidden in the back of a shrubbery if you don't want to look at them. These are good for overwintering invertebrates and provide safe refugia and somewhere to hibernate, for reptiles and amphibians.
5. Create wildlife corridors. Look at your house on, for example Google Earth, and make a note of where the main wildlife corridors, which can include rivers, streams, lines of trees, woodland blocks and hedgerows. Many birds and mammals, including bats, will move and disperse along these corridors, so if you can 'tie' your garden into a wildlife corridor by linking in linear planting along your garden boundary, for example, or even joining one corridor to another by providing a safe route for animals to follow through your garden, you will end up drawing a lot more wildlife into your garden than you might otherwise expect to see.
6. Structure is very important in a garden. Make sure your garden has structural planting in the form of trees, which provide song posts for birds, dense shrubberies for nesting and shelter, and lower level habitats in the form of herbaceous borders, grassland and bare earth for foraging. Spiny shrubs such as Pyracantha are particularly useful in providing somewhere safe for birds to nest.
7. If you have room, create a wildlife meadow. Many species of butterfly have a larval stage which feeds in grassland, either on the grass itself, or on the associated broad leaved species. The meadow should be in a sunny part of the garden so as to attract butterflies and bees. Choose a native seed mix suitable fro your soil, and use this to supplement whatever is in your lawn turf. You can sow by 'scarifying' the lawn turf with a rake and seeding in the slots. It is also possible to buy many wildflowers as plant plugs, and bring them into your meadow this way. Mow once a year and rake off the cut litter (this can be given to livestock if there is no ragwort in your meadow). Try not to remove the anthills as these will attract green woodpecker into your garden.
8. Start a compost heap. Composting is an environmental sustainable thing to do, and very rewarding and useful if you grow your own veg. This ideally needs to be designed so that you can dig out compost from one heap whilst the others are maturing, so a 3-bin system is ideal. Compost heaps support a myriad of invertebrates, and thus attract reptiles, birds, bats and amphibians to the garden. They also provide a safe winter refuge for amphibians and other wildlife.
9. If you have room, dig a wildlife pond. Any pond which does not contain fish is likely to attract frogs, toads and newts, and you may also get grass snakes. The pond should be at least 1m deep in the middle, so that the water cannot completely freeze in winter, and should have gently shelving margins so that you can grow bog plants or marginal species around the edges (if you use a rigid liner you can use thick plastic sheeting to make a boggy area next to the pond). If you feed your pond with rainwater you are unlikely to have any problems with algal blooms.
10. Bring as much plant diversity as possible into your garden. Different plants support and attract different species of invertebrate, and the more types of invertebrate you have the more types of bird, reptile, amphibian and mammal you will attract in. try to include some native species, as these will have specialist invertebrates feeding on the leaves or flowers, as well as attracting generalist species. Choose flowers which provide a nectar source and berries for food where possible.