

Wildlife Gardening Basics

Our gardens are an important part of Cornwall's living landscape and the way they are managed can make a big difference to wildlife. Together they form a network linking with nature reserves and the wider countryside, and have become increasingly important havens for wildlife as natural habitats are lost and fragmented. Creating a wildlife garden also provides the perfect opportunity to observe and enjoy nature...right on your doorstep! Here are some of the basic principles to help inspire you and get you started on making your garden more 'wildlife-friendly'. Many of these are described in more detail in accompanying information sheets.

Start gradually

Creating space for wildlife in your garden needs some enthusiasm, planning, time and effort but it needn't be a great expense or upheaval. Simply resolving to be more sympathetic to the needs of wildlife in your general approach to gardening can have benefits. Whether new or established you can adapt your garden to attract wildlife (by providing food, water, shelter and a place to breed) and you don't need to practice it on a large scale; a wildlife corner could be set aside in a formal garden without looking untidy. Wildlife gardening does not mean letting things grow unchecked; it will still need to be managed, just in a different way. The possibilities are endless so it's a case of choosing a project which suits you and your garden. Then you can sit back and enjoy the sights and sounds of all the birds, insects and animals finding sanctuary.

Don't be too tidy

Try not to be overly neat and tidy as wildlife will not appreciate it! Dead vegetation is essential in the wildlife garden. Instead of burning dead leaves sweep them under shrubs to provide a mulch or compost them. Leave areas of longer grass or a pile of logs to rot down. These provide an ideal shelter, feeding, nesting or hibernation place for lots of creatures including invertebrates, amphibians and small mammals, many of which will in turn prey upon slugs, greenfly and other garden pests. Leaving a patch of nettles or brambles will provide a home for many insects.



Piles of dead wood provide a useful wildlife habitat. Photo: Tamara Weeks

Autumn windfall fruit can be left as food for birds in particular blackbirds. A pile of rotting grass cuttings may, if you are lucky, be used as a nesting site by a grass snake.

Think organic

Using a compost heap is an ideal way to recycle your organic kitchen and garden waste and they also make excellent habitats for a range of wildlife. Use your home-made compost or rotted manure to feed your plants instead of chemical fertilisers. Avoid using pesticides and herbicides; chemical treatment can sterilise the soil, killing micro-organisms needed to maintain a healthy soil structure, and many are non-selective. A wildlife-friendly garden will naturally develop a much better balance of predator and prey than one which is manicured. Try companion planting (using plants to support and protect each other from disease and pests) and hand weeding instead. Never use slug pellets as these will poison birds and hedgehogs that would willingly do the job for you.



Photo: Ian French

Create a mini-meadow



Photo: Ian French

A meadow makes a wonderful alternative to plain grass on your lawn and even a couple of square metres will encourage a diversity of insects, birds and mammals. Seed or plug-plants can be purchased to create

your own wildflower meadow. Alternatively cornfield annuals give a colourful display. Use seed and plants to reflect what naturally grows in your area. It is important to buy responsibly sourced plants from a reputable supplier, and preferably stock of British provenance. Contact us for a list of suitable suppliers. Don't be tempted to dig up plants from the wild; not only does it contribute to the loss of natural habitats, it is also illegal. Also remember that shop-bought wildflower seeds should never be scattered in the countryside.

Provide flowery borders

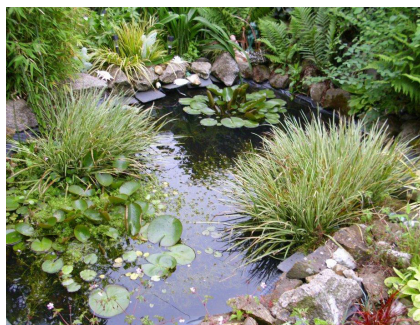
Your garden border can be made into a useful habitat by choosing plants of value to wildlife. A mixture of native and cultivated plants can be used to provide nectar and pollen for bees, butterflies and other insects or a source of seeds for birds. Choose plants with single flowers that flower at different times of year to ensure that pollen and nectar are available over a long period. Delay cutting back perennials until the spring as the seed heads that remain provide food for birds and other animals through the winter, while the stems and foliage provide shelter for hibernating insects.



Peacock butterfly.
Photo: Ian French

Add water

A wildlife pond can be a valuable addition to your garden, providing an essential habitat for invertebrates and amphibians, as well as a source of drinking or bathing water for birds and mammals. If you are planning a wildlife pond, be imaginative. Choose a sunny site away from overhanging trees. It need only be around 30cm deep in the middle and have gently sloping sides to allow easy access for animals. An associated marshy area is especially beneficial.



A garden pond can be a magnet for wildlife.
Photo: Frankie Cowling

Native marginal and aquatic plants can be introduced but resist the temptation to move vegetation or frog spawn from other ponds as this can spread disease, parasites and non-native invasive plants. You will be amazed at how quickly creatures

such as great diving beetles, dragonflies and pond skaters find their way to your pond unaided. Even a small container pond can be beneficial as long you make sure wildlife can get in and out.

Plant a tree

If you have the space you could plant a variety of trees or shrubs. Native species such as oak, birch, elder and hawthorn will generally support a wider range of biodiversity but there are many non-natives that can also be very useful, especially in producing winter berries and nectar-rich flowers, as well as evergreen foliage to provide cover in the winter.

Hedges, walls and fences

Well-managed hedges provide a wealth of opportunity for wildlife. They act as shelter, breeding places, corridors for animals to move between gardens and can provide nectar and berries as food. Cornish hedges can be particularly rich in wildlife and nooks and crannies in stone walls are valuable micro-habitats. Concrete walls and fences can also be used to create further habitats if you attach a trellis or other support and grow a variety of climbing plants. Ivy provides excellent cover and food for birds, and night-scented species such as honeysuckle are a rich source of nectar and will attract moths and other insects.



Blackbird amongst ivy.
Photo: Terry Dunstan

Install some creature features



A home for overwintering insects.
Photo: Tamara Weeks

You can provide all sorts of additional features for wildlife such as bird and bat boxes, a hedgehog hibernaculum or toad home, a rockery for reptiles or 'mini-beast hotel' for overwintering insects such as solitary bees, ladybirds and lacewings. A huge range of animal homes are available to buy and many can be made at home using recycled odds and ends. A bird bath is also important and bird feeders can be used to provide supplementary food. Hibernating hedgehogs often make use of temporary features such as unlit bonfires so always check first when lighting fires.

Wider issues

Think carefully about the origin of anything you buy. Ensure plants come from cultivated stock (not from the wild) and that the use of any material does not put a habitat under threat, whether in the UK or abroad. For example;

- Homemade compost can be used instead of buying peat-based products.
- Look out for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo when purchasing wooden items.
- Do not collect pebbles and shingle from beaches for rockeries or water features as this can disrupt natural systems.
- If using limestone make sure it is not sourced from limestone pavements, irreplaceable habitats threatened by the demand for ornamental stone.
- Use water efficiently, recycle rainwater by installing a water butt and apply mulches to help retain soil moisture.
- Take care not to introduce garden/pond plants into the wider countryside; discard of plant material responsibly via greenwaste collections or composting.

And most importantly.....enjoy your garden and its wealth of wildlife!

Further information and advice

Wildlife Information Service (WIS)
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 302 250
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk
Web: www.ercis.org.uk

Other useful resources

- Wild About Gardens
www.wildaboutgardens.org
- Organic Gardening
www.gardenorganic.org.uk
- 'Wildlife Gardening: a practical handbook' by Fran Hill
- 'How to Make a Wildlife Garden' by Chris Baines

Get involved

Share your sightings with us
Online Recording for Kernow and Scilly (ORKS)
www.ercis.org.uk/orks

Become a member
www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk