

# “The Why and How of Wildlife Gardening”

**Dr Steve Head Wildlife Gardening Forum**

[www.wlgf.org](http://www.wlgf.org) [Steve@wlgf.org](mailto:Steve@wlgf.org)

Gardens are important for biodiversity. They are much more friendly places for wildlife than most farms or plantations. With more than half a million hectares of gardens in England, they are over 4% of the area of the country (one fifth the size of Wales) and compare with the area of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Typical gardens could be home to forty species of birds, five or six species of mammals and up to six species of amphibians and reptiles. This is impressive enough, but Jenny Owen’s important studies in her garden in Leicester showed just how many species live in gardens. She studied and recorded:

- 422 species of plants
- 364 species of butterflies and moths
- 251 species of beetles
- A total of 2,204 species in 34 groups !

But allowing for the groups of animals she couldn’t study, we can be confident there would have been up to 8,450 species that could have been collected. She found species never before collected anywhere in England, and even some new to science. It is in the invertebrates that garden biodiversity lies – the little creature that make the world work. While a few are pests, most are innocuous, and many really helpful to the gardener.

Gardens are actually more biodiverse (per unit area) than rainforests, because they have :

- Artificially high plant diversity (thanks to you and the garden centre)
- They have new habitats created every year – digging and changing beds
- Great variety of physical structure – trees, shrubs, walls and fences
- Lawns, ponds and rockeries
- Lots of different food supplies and sources
- Garden habitats mimic on a small scale the great variety of natural habitats.

Gardens are now the main habitat for some important species like stag beetles, house martins and house sparrows, song thrushes, pipistrelle bats and frogs. In addition they are “supermarkets” for many mammals and birds that may nest elsewhere.

There are a few potential conflicts between gardeners and wildlife :

## **Gardeners like :**

Order and tidiness  
Formal water features  
Goldfish  
Close cut grass  
Single species hedges  
Ornamental conifers  
Lots of non-native plants  
Useful chemicals

## **Wildlife likes :**

Plenty of places to hide  
More natural ponds  
No Goldfish or ducks !!!  
Patches of long grass and flowers  
Multi-species hedges  
Nice juicy deciduous trees  
Some species need native plants  
Chemicals are generally bad news

- but these are much less significant than the ways in which the two work together.

There are many poor books on wildlife gardening which preserve a set of myths that have grown up with time. The seminal work of the BUGS (Biodiversity in Urban GardenS) project in Sheffield University (and subsequent work) has exploded many of these. For example:

- “Only big suburban gardens are of value” *Not true – for most insects tiny gardens seem enormous, and lots of little gardens combine to create big areas of varied habitat*
- “You must only plant native species” *Not true – there was no correlation between species of wildlife and the numbers of native plants in gardens. If exotic plants didn’t support wildlife, we would not be queuing up to buy insecticides.*
- “Replace lawns with wildflower meadows”. *Very difficult in practice, but you can let some grass grow longer, and/or plant “cornfield annuals” to get a colourful carpet on flower beds,*
- “Wildlife gardens must contain nettles for butterfly breeding” *Fortunately not true! No butterflies used the BUGS nettle patches. Nettles are absurdly abundant everywhere, and only a nutter would introduce them into their garden.*
- “Buying special homes for animals is necessary and effective”. *Not true – bumblebees nests simply do not work. Buying a dormouse box won’t bring dormice into your garden unless they live in the wood next door.*
- “Cats and magpies kill all the song birds”. *Not true, cats predominately catch weak birds that would probably not survive to breed.*
- “Feeding birds is always a good thing to do”. *It helps them, but unless feeders are regularly cleaned, they can pass on fatal diseases to garden birds.*
- And finally, wildlife gardens do NOT have to be untidy

What BUGS found to be important include:

- Trees and large shrubs
- A variety of habitats – lawns, borders, flower beds, veg patch etc
- A good variety of plants
- Ponds, log piles, Compost heaps
- Hedges and walls

And the negative factors were:

- Lots of hard surfaces, concrete, paving decking
- Too much tidiness (just as on farmland)
- Slug pellets – anything designed to kill things

The national Wildlife Gardening Forum has put together 10 Top Tips for wildlife Gardening. These are :

**Brighten your garden with flowers that provide pollen and nectar for bees, butterflies and other insects.** Wild flowers are good, but so are many garden plants. Aim to offer food for insects from spring to autumn. Valuable choices include aubrietia, forget-me-not and flowering currant for spring, lavender and thyme for summer and sedum, Michaelmas daisy and hebe for autumn.

**Grow a variety of trees, shrubs and climbers, or a mixed hedge, to give food and shelter.** Small trees good for blossom and berries include rowan, crab apple and hawthorn. Ivy provides shelter for nesting birds, autumn flowers for nectar and winter berries for birds and small mammals.

**Look after mature trees in and around your garden and they'll look after the wildlife.**

Mature trees are more important for wildlife than any other single factor – if your garden's too small for big trees, get some planted in the neighbourhood, and protect those that are already there.

**Add water – an upturned bin-lid is a start or, better still, dig a pond.** Make sure ponds have at least one gently sloping side to allow creatures an easy way out, and add lots of plants to establish a good balance.

**Leave a pile of dead wood in a shady spot.** Any wood will do although big, natural logs are best and can make a home for anything from beetles to hedgehogs.

**Build a compost heap, which will help all your garden plants and wildlife.** Compost makes for healthy soil, which is good for everything living in it and growing on it. Compost heaps also shelter many small creatures, and even some larger ones, like slug-loving slow worms.

**Provide food and water for birds all year round.** Offering a mix of food including peanuts, sunflower hearts, seeds, kitchen scraps and fat balls, as well as natural food such as berries and seed-heads, will attract a wide range of birds.

**Relax! Don't be too tidy and leave some areas undisturbed.** Piles of leaves and twiggy debris tucked in a hedge bottom or out-of-the-way corner will provide shelter for frogs, mice and hedgehogs, and the seeds in dead flower heads can be valuable food.

**Allow a patch of grass to grow longer.** This will encourage wild flowers, provide shelter for small mammals and food for some butterfly caterpillars.

**Garden sustainably to help protect wildlife and the environment worldwide.** Use chemicals only as a last resort, avoid peat, choose wood from sustainable sources, recycle all you can and save water.

And the bonus tip is to spend time *enjoying* your garden, and actually watching the creatures that share the garden with you.

If you enjoy garden wildlife or belong to a club or organisation with an interest in Wildlife Gardening, you may be interested in joining the **Wildlife Gardening Forum**. It's free and anyone can be a member

The Forum coordinates information about new projects, encourages partnership between its members, and is working to raise awareness about the importance of gardens among gardeners, planners and politicians. We hold conferences and issue newsletters

If you are interested, send an email to [members@wlgf.org](mailto:members@wlgf.org)

## Further reading about wildlife gardening

No nettles required: the reassuring truth about wildlife gardening. Ken Thompson. 2006 Eden Project books (*a brilliant readable and funny account of the Sheffield University BUGS project. Highly recommended*)

How to make a wildlife garden. Chris Baines. 2000 Frances Lincoln. (*Chris started it all, and this is still worth reading*)

Garden Natural History. Stefan Buczacki 2007 Collins New Naturalist. (*I find this a bit dogmatic in places, but it is the fullest overall scientific analysis*)

Wildlife Gardening for Everyone. Malcolm Tait (ed) 2006 Think Books. (*backed by the RHS and wildlife trusts, lots of good stuff*)

The Pond Book: a Guide to Management and Creation of Ponds. P Williams *et al.* 1999, Pond Conservation, Oxford. (*the best science based advice*)

The Wildlife Pond Handbook. Louise Bardsley. 2003. New Holland. (*A very good book, well informed by the above, and more practical*)

Creating small habitats for wildlife in your garden. Josie Briggs. 2002. Guild of Master Craftsman Publications Ltd

Wildlife Friendly Plants. Rosemary Creeser. 2004 Firefly Books. (*a useful resumé, but don't assume plants not in here are not beneficial. These plants actively attract birds and nectar feeders*)

Wildlife of a garden: A Thirty-Year Study. Jennifer Owen 2010. RHS. (*very important scientific analysis, it proved the importance of gardens for wildlife.*)

The Naturalist's Garden. John Feltwell 1987, Ebury Press. (*interesting historical take*)

Gardening for Butterflies, bees and other beneficial insects. Jan Miller-Klein Saith Fynnon Books. *Good on food plants and habitat creation*

RSPB Gardening for Wildlife. Adrian Thomas 2010. *Irritatingly good!*

### Identification Guides

Garden Wildlife of Britain and Europe. Michael Chinery 2001. Collins Nature Guides

RSPB Handbook of Garden Wildlife. Peter Holden and Geoffrey Abbott. 2008 RSPB

Guide to Garden Wildlife. Richard Lewington. 2008 British Wildlife Publishing.

*(all on the same theme, the Lewington book is the best)*

Garden Birds and Wildlife. Mike Toms and Dr Paul Sterry 2008 BTO/AA Publishing

*(Large and lavish, but very good indeed on birds, not bad on the rest)*

### Websites:

**Forum Website** [www.wlgf.org](http://www.wlgf.org)

NE booklets [http://www.wlgf.org/wlgf\\_website\\_043.htm](http://www.wlgf.org/wlgf_website_043.htm)

BUGS project results <http://www.bugs.group.shef.ac.uk>

Garden wildlife website [www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk/wildlife.htm](http://www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk/wildlife.htm)

Wild about Gardens website [www.wildaboutgardens.org](http://www.wildaboutgardens.org) (*includes Forum Manifesto*)

List of specialist natural history societies:

[www.nhm.ac.uk/jdsml/research-curation/library/digital-library/nature-societies-online](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/jdsml/research-curation/library/digital-library/nature-societies-online)

List of reliable sources of native plants . [www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org)

The Pollinator Garden. <http://www.foxleas.com> *Marc Carlton's superlative compendium of advice and plant lists*