



ENGLISH  
NATURE

# Wildlife-friendly gardening

A general guide



working today  
for nature tomorrow

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## A general guide



Cottage garden. Paul Keene/Avico Ltd

**Biodiversity is the amazing richness and variety of wildlife around us. English Nature believes that everyone should be able to enjoy a greater wealth of wildlife and pass on a rich and diverse natural heritage to future generations. Everyone can do their bit for biodiversity by gardening with wildlife in mind.**

Britain is a nation of gardeners. We also love wildlife. Until quite recently though, we tended to keep our two loves apart. We went to the country to see wild animals and wild flowers and kept the garden for cultivated plants and lawns. But close-mown lawns and carefully weeded borders of roses offer few opportunities for wildlife. Sadly, the same is now true of much of the farmed countryside, as advances in food production have usually been made at the expense of wildlife habitats.

## Getting started

The kind of wildlife garden you can create will depend on the size and aspect of your plot and on the soil, whether peaty or lime-rich, free-draining or clayey. And, of course, on your own tastes and interests. If it's a new garden, don't rush to blanket the surface with topsoil - many wild flowers prefer the less fertile subsoil. If it's already well-established, make a list or plan. Better still, draw a diagram of existing features and consider how they might be enhanced to benefit wildlife. Involve your children from the start. Their enthusiasm and imagination will be valuable allies, both now and later. Here are some things to do and to look out for:

Ox-eye daisies. Charron Pugsley-Hill/English Nature



- List what is currently in your garden. Is there a water course or a naturally damp hollow?
- Are there shrubs or a portion of hedge, or a stone or brick wall? All these will form anchor points when you consider where to plant or dig.
- Note which parts catch the sun, and when. Are there places of permanent shade or any natural sun-traps? Mark them on your plan.
- Squat down and examine the surface. Is it entirely level or are there rises and depressions? Could these be raised into banks or deepened into dells? Nature thrives on irregularity.
- Consider what uses your garden will serve. You may want space for growing your own fruit and vegetables; children may need room to play. Many people grade their garden from a patio and bird table close to the house, through play space to a pond and a 'wilderness' at the back.
- Don't be in too much of a hurry! Working with nature takes a little time. Make a timetable, and plan things over a year or more. You can always get more ambitious later on, as your expertise and enthusiasm grow.



Small pond for wildlife. George Barker/English Nature

You don't have to let your garden 'go wild' to make it attractive to wildlife. Beauty and wild gardening are not at all incompatible and the best nature gardens are the product of careful planning and... well, thoughtful gardening.

The secret of gardening with nature is to relax: the solution to some problems may be to do nothing at all. Ask yourself whether you really have to mow **all** the lawn **quite** so often. Why not let some plants go to seed, instead of cutting them after flowering, or allow the ivy to spread further along the wall? Look for beauty in small, modest flowers like speedwells and campions. Above all,

try not to use herbicides, slug pellets or pesticide sprays. In a well-balanced garden, natural predators do much of your job for you - and for free. Your example may be one that neighbours may follow and it will be hugely beneficial to the wildlife living in and visiting your garden.

### **Ponds and other wet bits**

If watching nature gives you pleasure, dig a pond. Garden ponds have helped to conserve frogs, dragonflies and many other water creatures, whose natural habitats have disappeared or become polluted. It's amazing how quickly some of these will discover a new home.

Before long, there is an entire self-contained ecosystem in your own backyard!

There is no ideal size for a wildlife pond - just make it as large as you can and at least half a metre deep in the middle. Even really small ponds can be useful for wildlife and a source of enjoyment for you. An ideal location for a pond is a natural hollow which catches the sun. An irregular or kidney-shaped pond may look better than a circle or rectangle, and there should be a shallow shelf on the sunny side at least. A pond can be at the centre of the wild garden, perhaps as part of a larger bog garden, or tucked away in a secluded corner - although

here it may quickly fill with leaves. Make sure that you consider small children - water has a magnetic attraction for toddlers. Fencing or a hard grill may be required. First, peg out the chosen area and a zone for dumping earth and stones. This spoil can be used for a

bank or rockery. As you dig, make a gently sloping shelf. When you've finished, make the hole as smooth as you can, picking out any stones and debris and using sand to fill any gaps. Use a piece of old carpet felt or jute sacking to cushion the hole and then spread out a heavy duty butyl rubber sheet, tucking it into the edges and bays. You can now buy specially-made underlays if you need them and these can go both under and over the rubber liner. Liners are available from most good garden centres. There is no need to add soil. Hose in the water. Finally, tuck the sheet under at the edges, weighing it down with turfs or tones. Your pond awaits your pleasure!



The "common" frog is now a rarity in some places but flourishes in gardens.  
Roy Harris/English Nature

When choosing pond plants, go mainly for native species. Many are very attractive and often deliciously scented. Some plants should never be introduced to garden ponds, let alone the wild, as they are very invasive and out-compete those which are more desirable in wildlife ponds. Species to be avoided include parrot's feather, Canadian pondweed and Australian stonecrop. Ask for advice from

the suppliers if in doubt. Garden centres provide a wide range of pond plants, from those of the water margin, like water plantain, water mint and bog-bean, to true aquatics like water crowfoot, starwort and water milfoil. Large water lilies are suitable only for large ponds, but floating plants like amphibious bistort and *Potamogeton natans* are ideal. For vivid colour, try flowering rush, purple loosestrife or marsh marigold.

The common darter is often found around garden ponds. Paul Lacey/English Nature



To give the ecosystem a boost, add a few bucketfuls of mud from a well-established local pond. If you want to attract frogs and newts, don't stock the pond with fish. They may gobble up the tadpoles - and lots more besides. If you must have fish, think sticklebacks, rather than goldfish.

Periodic pond jobs will include scooping out leaves and much of the plant growth in the autumn, and topping up in hot weather.

Rainwater is best for this, either collected in a water butt or, ideally, channelled directly from the gutters of the house. As the pond settles down, you may have an epidemic of blanketweed (green thread-like algae). You can rake out the worst of it (it makes good compost), but don't panic - nature has its own



Cowslips. Charron Pugsley-Hill/English Nature

remedies, if allowed enough time. Once established, a wildlife pond maintains itself reasonably well. If you are very short of space, try sinking an old enamel or china bath or kitchen sink (with the plug in!) into a corner. Add a few stones at one end, so that frogs and toads can crawl out as well as jump in.



Purple loosestrife makes a magnificent spectacle in late summer. Dr Chris Gibson/English Nature

## Do-it-yourself marshland

A DIY marsh can be made in the same way as a pond, using butyl sheets. In this case, dig a shallow saucer-shaped hole, spread the sheeting and then fill it in again! You can extend your pond into a real wetland in this way, or use it as a substitute for a pond if you have small children. Many plants of pond margins will grow quite happily in your artificial marsh, as long as it stays permanently wet. Maintaining water levels is important, to avoid nettles and docks taking over.

## Remember those summer meadows...

Few of us live close to a real flower meadow, worked for hay in the old familiar way. But a pocket-sized version can be created, with a little effort, and once established will hum with bees and dance with butterflies in summer. A gardening definition of a meadow might be ‘an overgrown lawn’. Unfortunately, most lawns - if left uncut - turn into dull, rank fields with few wild flowers other than docks and thistles. For a beautiful meadow, whether a spring

one with bulbs and cowslips or a summer one sprinkled with ox-eye daisies, knapweed, scabious and a score of other flowers - some preparation is needed. Flower meadows thrive on poor soils where the flowers can compete with grasses. This is why fertiliser has turned the pretty meadows of the past into monotonous fields of 'fertiliser green'. Unless you're prepared to insert potted plants into the lawn - an expensive and time-consuming business - the topsoil has to go. If there is only an extremely thin layer, much of the topsoil may come away with the turf. What is needed ideally is a well-drained and well-raked subsoil to act as a seed bed. Before

sowing, though, first make sure that the ground is free of 'hard-case' weeds like ground elder and couch-grass. The trick is to allow their buried seeds or root systems time to grow - and then to clobber them before they have a chance to set seed. Choose your weapon: mower, hoe, flame gun or even (for once) non-persistent herbicide.

Making a wildflower meadow is not easy but when the effort succeeds, the rewards are huge, so keep trying! Constant attention is needed after sowing seeds to ensure that grasses and unwanted plants do not take unfair advantage and spoil the effect you are aiming to achieve.

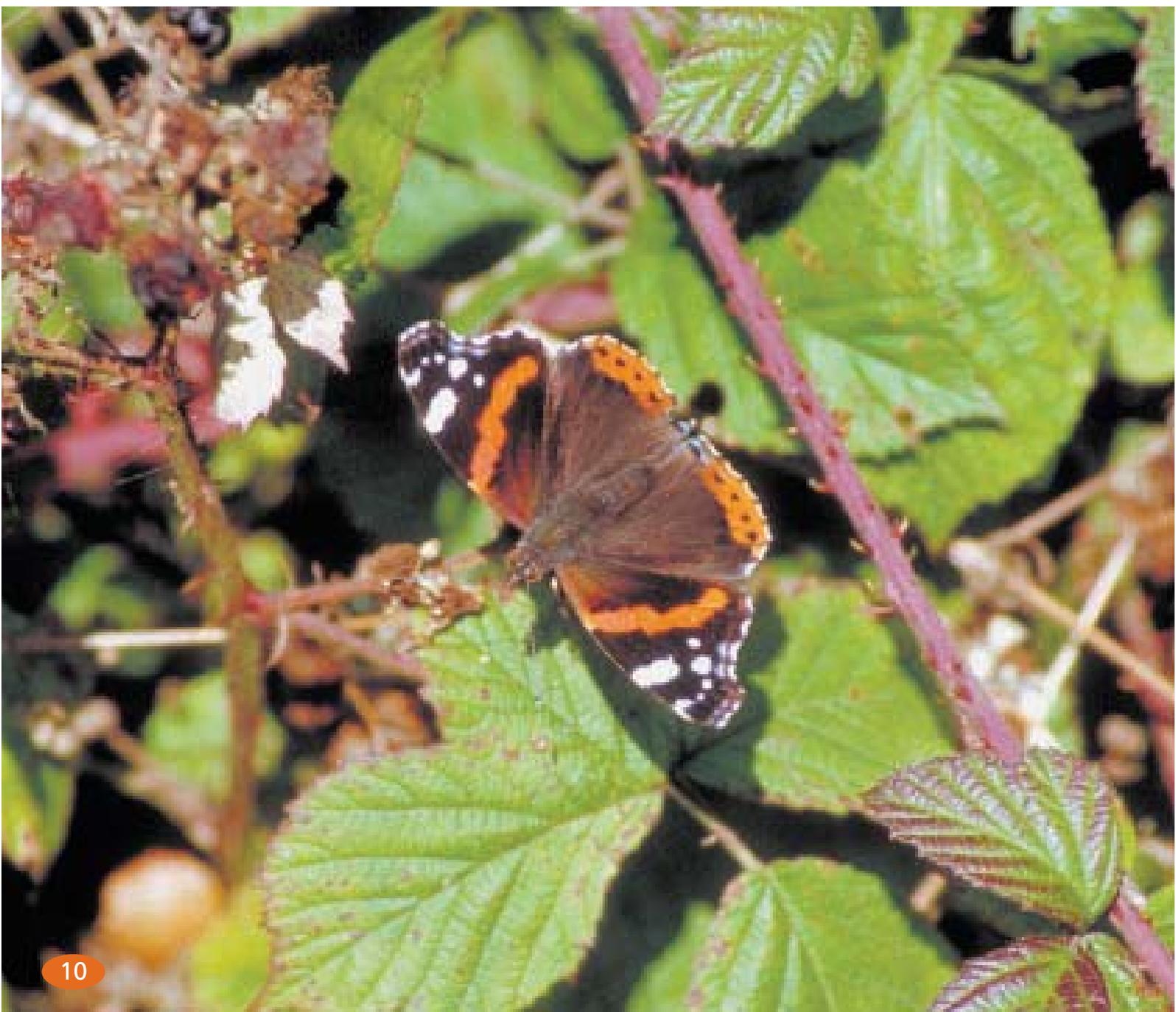
The seeds of common poppies can remain viable for many years. Dr Chris Gibson/English Nature



Don't dig up wild plants for your garden - it rarely succeeds, it's illegal and it robs the countryside of wild colour. Packets of wild flower seed mixed with grasses are widely available. But read the labels carefully and look for a packet with a conservation mixture guaranteed to be of locally native species harvested from British meadows. Follow the instructions given, but preferably also consult an expert or one of the many books available.

Spring meadows should be cut at least twice a year, in June and again in early autumn, to allow room for the smaller, more delicate plants to bloom. Bulbs like snowdrops, snowflakes and fritillaries are best planted on loamy ground which is moist in early spring but dries out later. Summer meadows should be cut only once, like a 'real' meadow, preferably in August after most flowers have ripened seed. Leave some plants uncut at the edge of the meadow: some bugs may overwinter

Red admiral on bramble. Dr Chris Gibson/English Nature



in the seedheads. Always remove the 'hay' and clippings - otherwise they will form a mulch and encourage grasses at the expense of flowers. The clippings can be used on the compost heap.

### In a leafy shade

In many ways, a garden shrubbery resembles the edge of a woodland ride or glade. At least, the wildlife seems to think so and this is why sheltered gardens are so favoured by blackbirds, robins, hedgehogs and bats. You can create a glade in a corner of the garden by the artful planting of shrubs or by modifying what's there already. What is needed is sunny **edge** - as much edge as possible.

From the point of view of a bird or butterfly, a shrubby border, meandering in and out of the sun, is a vertical extension of the ground, filled with good things: catkin pollen, flower nectar, berries, nuts, grubs and perches. By having planting zones, you can increase the edge still further: try herbaceous perennials at the front and then small flowering shrubs. Behind these might come larger shrubs and – if you have the space - perhaps a group of small trees



Primroses. Dr Chris Gibson/English Nature

at the back. To top it all, under-plant the glade with hedgerow flowers like primrose, violets, wild strawberry and stitchwort. By careful planning, you can compress what in a real wood might need an acre or two into a room-sized mini-reserve by the garden fence.

Which species should you plant? Aim at providing sources of food over as long a season as possible. The core of the shrubbery should be native species like hawthorn, privet and guelder rose (wild, rather than exotic forms are better for wildlife), but there is no reason not to supplement them with non-native shrubs, like buddleia for butterflies, hebe for bees and hoverflies or *Pyracantha* for birds. Don't forget climbers, like honeysuckle and dog-rose.



Angle shades moth. Dr Rob Wolton/English Nature

Most gardens are too small for forest trees, but hazel, spindle, cherry-plum, silver birch, alder and rowan are more manageable, and are excellent for wildlife.

Don't trim the glade too often, and preferably not at all in spring and summer (except for early-flowering species). Wildlife thrives on lack of disturbance: cultivate a 'shaggy' look rather than a well-clipped hedge and go for a large bushy corner or – for more edge – medium-sized islands of bushes separated by lawn.

Bramble patches can be marvellous for wildlife, providing flowers, fruit and nesting opportunities. However,

if you do plant blackberry, try to find a non-aggressive variety as some strains can be very invasive. Vigorous pruning will keep it in check. Stinging nettles are the food plant of some beautiful butterflies and moths, but there is no general shortage of nettles and they will be of little use to butterflies in the shade. If you decide to include some, make sure they are in full sunlight, preferably with flowers nearby.

### **Below the garden wall**

A crumbly stone or flint wall can be wonderful, but a brick one will do. Your local wildlife will know how to get the best out of an old

wall, but you can help. The more ivy, the better, as it is a very important nectar source, when most other flowers are over, as well as a late provider of berries. Ferns will find crumbly niches for themselves, but you can plant ivy-leaved toadflax and other climbers if they do not grow nearby.

Beneath the wall, where the sun falls for part of the day, is the place for old-fashioned cottage flowers, so much richer in nectar and scent than modern cultivars. Plant foxglove, mullein, sweet Williams, *Verbena bonariensis* and Michaelmas daisies. And in the hottest spot of all, see what a buddleia bush will do in late summer when thirsty peacock and

Many more species of bird than ever now come to feeders in gardens. Paul Glendell/English Nature



tortoiseshell butterflies are about. If you are looking for somewhere to pile loose stones or broken bricks, here it is: a basking place for insects, a hunting ground for spiders, and, who knows, perhaps even a refuge for lizards.

## Feeding our feathered friends

Where would a wild garden be without a bird table? But think carefully where you should place it. Many people like to watch birds while they do the washing up, or from the living-room window. But make sure the table is away from fences and cover, and out of reach of cats. The greater the choice of food you offer, the more species you may see. Tits like fat and chains of peanuts hung from the table; finches appreciate sunflower heads; and greenfinches, siskins and even nuthatches and woodpeckers have a passion for peanuts inside orange nylon bags (make sure the nuts have not been chemically treated).

Blackbirds prefer to feed on the ground and will appreciate a few apple halves or cores. If you have an apple tree, collect some windfalls and put them out in the open where the birds can feed more safely. Robins are fond of crumbled bits of hard cheese. All birds eat bread, but white bread is not particularly nutritious and stale bread is actually harmful. It is kinder, especially in hard weather, to offer nuts, fat and bird cake.

## Born in a box

Without boxes to nest in, there would be fewer great tits and blue tits to grace our gardens in summer, for their natural nesting habitats - cavities in mature trees - are scarce, outside old woodland. Like the bird table, a nest box should be positioned with care - out of the direct sun and the reach of furry predators, and preferably in a quiet corner of the garden. Various kinds are available. Those with small entrance holes are for tits, while open-sided boxes are used by robins, thrushes and starlings. You can try to attract an owl with a 'chimney' box, or offer house martins an off-the-peg papier-mâché cup. You can also buy or make boxes for bats. These have a

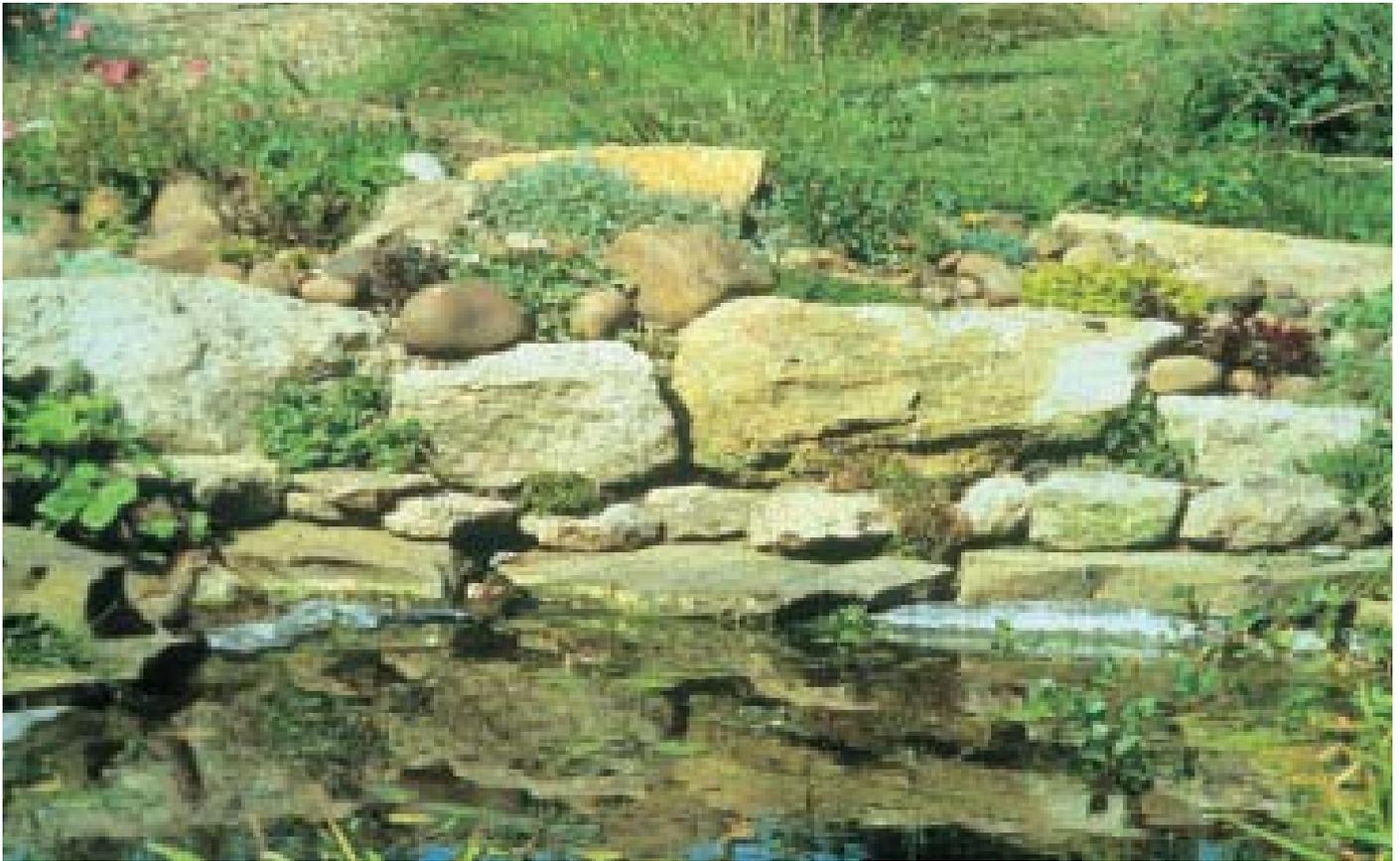
White tailed bumble bee (queen). Roger Key/English Nature



A little effort brings great rewards.  
Paul Glendell/English Nature

narrow gap at the back and a rough or a corrugated inner wall for the bats to cling to. The most likely bat to





Stones around a pond are good hiding places for newts. George Barker/English Nature

accept your offer of accommodation is the pipistrelle, but you may also attract long-eared bats and other less common species. These boxes are sometimes used by wrens, especially during cold weather. Other artificial boxes are also available these days, for ladybirds, lacewings and bees.

Other wildlife 'homes' can be made very simply. A tree stump can simply be left alone, preferably with one side in the sun and the other in the shade. Or you can create a 'habitat pile' of cut logs, valuable for insects and fungi. Remember, though, that if you later decide to burn the wood, you will incinerate all its beetle lodgers as well as the many interesting fungi which will have colonised it. The general rule with

logs is to burn them immediately or not at all. Give a thought to mud. Bare, sometimes 'squishy' patches are an excellent and, believe it or not, a declining wildlife habitat. Other bare ground in full sunlight is equally valuable, as many minibeasts need to warm their bodies before they can become fully active.

Don't forget compost. Compost heaps are habitats as well as the products of a greener way of gardening; grass snakes love their inner heat and sometimes use them to incubate their eggs. And if you like reptiles, try leaving a sheet of corrugated iron where it will warm, but not bake, in the sun. This is a tried and tested method of attracting snakes.

## If space is short ...

..there are still ways to attract wildlife. A window box or even hanging baskets can be an answer. Try wild herbs and scented bedding plants, germinated from seed in pots. Using a little artistry, and not sowing too densely, an attractive arrangement of spreading, cushion and upright wild flowers can be achieved. Suitable species include thyme, marjoram, basil thyme, salad burnet, lady's bedstraw, speedwell, stitchwort and ivy-leaved toadflax. Old chimney pots make excellent plant containers, either as pot holders, or, if there are holes in the sides, as cylinders of sprouting greenery - perfect for a patio or around the barbecue. The area of a garden can also be increased by building upwards. Try making a rockery (good for frogs, toads and newts to hide in) or a grassy bank or mound. Here, if you are lucky, grass snakes or lizards could lie in the sun.

## Helping the environment

You can help to conserve wildlife by refusing to buy products that are based on its harmful exploitation. Many gardening products cause harm to wildlife habitats. These include tropical hardwoods for furniture, south east Asian charcoal for barbecues, peat from bogs, rock from limestone pavements and even

pebbles from our rivers and beaches. The greater part of England's peat bogs has been destroyed since 1945 to provide peat compost for gardens. Many beautiful limestone pavements (rocky areas that have lots of cracks running through where many rare wild plants can grow) have been quarried away to produce 'water-worn stone' for garden rockeries. These increasingly rare habitats are of international importance.

With so few wild bogs left, those who care about wildlife should use alternative ways of potting plants and improving the flower-beds. Even big organisations like the National Trust are now gardening without using any peat, so it can be done! Many gardeners say that old-fashioned compost makes a much better mulch than peat – and it costs nothing. For germinating seeds and growing pot plants, various peat-free composts are available. Ask your garden supplier about them, and experiment to find the best one for your purposes. You can often get good results from using recycled, biodegradable paper pots, which then decay or are eaten by worms.

You can also help the environment by deciding not to use chemicals to control unwanted insects and weeds. Nature has its own ways of controlling 'pests', and by gardening **with** nature rather than against it you soon find allies. Try the old trick of planting French or African marigolds



Like this 'two-spot', most species of ladybird in England eat aphids.  
Dr Roger Key/English Nature

among green vegetables – the flowers seem to have their own chemical defences. Similarly, lavender near roses seems to help deter aphids. Rotate or change the crops after a season or two, as farmers used to do. It helps to avoid a build-up of pests, and gives the soil time to revitalise itself. You can also simply choose plants and crops which are less susceptible to damage by invertebrates.

When it comes to the wealth of wildlife in the garden, minibeasts - spiders, centipedes, snails and above all, insects - are what it's all about. There may be easily a couple of thousand species living in a not overly-tidy garden and all but a tiny handful of greenfly and slugs are either harmless or beneficial. All of them are fascinating. To encourage these minibeasts, have plenty of open-structured nectar flowers, be careful with chemicals, keep a compost heap, don't be too fastidious in tidying up dead leaves and leave some areas a bit overgrown to provide cover for roosting or hibernating creatures.

A wildlife-friendly garden will contain a much better balance of predator and prey than one which is manicured. In the long run, there should be less (or no) need for poison bottles and sprays.

## Some gardening hints

- Visit public gardens to see how some experts do it. In recent years, many large gardens have set aside a nature area. Details can be found in *The Good Gardening Guide*.
- Get to know your local wildlife, whether in a nearby park, open space or nature reserve, or in your immediate surroundings if you live in the country. By knowing what's likely to colonise your garden, you can plan accordingly.
- Keep a nature diary of observations and first sightings. Your garden could become an outdoor laboratory and photographic studio, or even a source of literary inspiration!
- Don't dig up flowers from the wild. It's illegal and in most cases they will not survive. These days, a wide range of wild flowers is available from seed and pots. Such wild flowers are more important in the wild where they can be enjoyed by others as well as serving their crucial role in our ecosystems. Ask friends and neighbours with garden ponds for aquatic plants.
- Read about gardening with nature. Many books and magazines give hints and tips on which species will suit your garden and how to raise plants from seed.
- Pat yourself on the back! A garden rich in wildlife can be a great source of pride. Take pleasure in watching the butterflies and listening to birdsong, in the knowledge that you have contributed another corner to a greener and healthier country.

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Other English Nature leaflets (available from the English Nature Enquiry Service: Tel. 01733 455101) include: *Plants for wildlife friendly gardens; Amphibians in your garden; Reptiles in your garden; Minibeasts in your garden; Focus on Bats; Composting; Wildflower meadows - how to create them in your garden. In preparation: Garden ponds and wet areas; Small mammals in your garden; Dragonflies and damselflies in your garden.*

English Nature also produces a CD, *Gardening with wildlife in mind*. This costs £9.99 plus postage and packing and is available from The Plant Press. Call John Stockdale on 01273 476151, e-mail [john@plantpress.com](mailto:john@plantpress.com) for a copy or ask [steve.berry@english-nature.org.uk](mailto:steve.berry@english-nature.org.uk) for more information.





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