

Take a Walk on the Wild side

Domestic gardens can play an extremely important role where nature conservation is concerned. By gardening with nature, choosing plants wisely and avoiding chemicals, it is relatively easy for any garden to become a successful centre for the neighbourhood's wildlife.

If you are missing out on birdsong and butterflies in your garden all you need is the right plants.

The key to building a successful garden which promotes wildlife is to provide a safe haven and a supply of food and water all year round. To achieve this one has to start to think differently about the domestic garden and try to consider what the natural habitat of hedgehogs, robins, blackbirds, sparrows, blue tits and butterflies would be in the wild and then plan these elements into the garden.

Try to provide a continuous supply of nectar from early spring to late autumn. For instance if you have grape hyacinths in flower in late March/April and the sun comes out, then overwintering butterflies will visit your garden. Certain ivies such as *Hedera helix* 'Aborescens' will provide an early winter flower and this will help to secure survival for a host of garden insects.

The production of a good crop of fruit and berries in the autumn will attract birds. Native trees such as Rowan, Hawthorn, Birdcherry and Alder are among some of the best for attracting birds

You can assist the food supply by artificially feeding as well, especially during the winter months. On reading an article recently, I learned that ten years ago only 17 species were known to visit garden feeders in the UK and now there are 80 different kinds of birds, some choosing seeds, some eating nuts or fruit.

In spring, when every adult bird is busy feeding their young, the little green caterpillars that most gardeners kill are vital for young birds, so have a thought the next time you see them. Primroses, campion, wood anemone in the shade or a hedge of native shrubs such as hawthorn, dogrose, holly and wild privet will provide an abundant supply of insects and a safe nesting site; even a layer of fallen leaves from such a hedge might shelter a hibernating hedgehog through the winter.

When you do that regular autumnal sweep-up of leaves you could pile some of them in a quiet corner with a few logs and you would be amazed at the variety of wild life that will move in as it all decays; slugs, snails, ground beetles, slaters, toads or shrews to name but a few and all of these are important in the food chain.

Introducing water into the wildlife garden does not have to be an expensive project and can invite a fantastic array of species to visit your garden and take advantage of a free bath or drink. A simple basin settled into the planting in a semi-shaded part of the garden is all it takes. Alternatively a bird bath as a piece of statuary can make a wonderful focal point in the garden and contribute something positive at the same time.

Bird boxes, bat boxes you can go on forever. However, if all you can do as a contribution to promoting wildlife in your garden is to reduce or stop using chemicals then that in itself will have an enormous impact on the natural balance over time. I can think of nothing more engaging and reviving than to sit quietly and watch the regular visitors to our garden and to think that this wonderful experience didn't even cost us anything.

Some more plants to attract wildlife :

Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*)
Firethorn (*Pyracantha*)
Marjoram (*Origanum vulgare*)
Lavander (*Lavandula angustifolia*)
Common Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)
Common Thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)
Heather, Ling (*Calluna vulgaris*)
Escallonia
Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*)
Lilac (*Syringa*)
Crab-apple (*Malus domestica*)

For more information on how to create a wildlife garden, I would recommend reading 'How to Make a Wildlife Garden' by Chris Baines (Frances Lincoln).

A valuable and local source of information is through Bob Davies at the Forvie Tree Nursery South Mains of Auchleuchries Tel: 01358 711292 Bob has worked in the area of conservation in the North East of Scotland for the last 25 years with enormous success; he gives talks to schools or will consult to private individuals on the subject and give practical assistance. Your local Biodiversity Officer will also have invaluable information and they are contactable through Aberdeen City Council.