



Your Garden Makes a Difference: An Urban Wildlife Refuge in Earley

We all know that having a nice garden can increase the value of your house, but it's proven that it's very good for your mental health and wellbeing as well. Did you also know that gardens can increase the value of urban habitats for wildlife too?

We must all start to realise that gardens are increasingly important as urban habitats. As well as tackling climate change it is our responsibility to return nature to what it was, a vibrant, encouraging arena that thrills or calms us, making the world a better place to live. For some of us this may be hard, it may mean changing habits formed over years such as *not* cutting the grass in May, leaving a corner of the garden untidy, making sure there are dead branches for insects, or growing plants that are good for bugs and butterflies rather than those we have prized in the past. But the sacrifice has its return in the increased natural life of the garden, with the joy of seeing insects, spiders, moths, butterflies, invertebrates, mammals and birds take their place in your garden as valued parts of our environment.

Craig Bennett CEO of the Wildlife Trust said in an interview with the Observer newspaper, “Consider the strain put on our Health Service by putting nature into decline. There is the impact on the nation’s mental health and then the harm done to our physical wellbeing. An example of this is the lack of trees in cities, this means poisoned air builds up leading to an alarming increase in health costs due to respiratory illness. *We are part of the tapestry of the world, not separate, we need to start behaving like that is the case*”.





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Wildlife Corridors

Urban areas experience a lot of habitat fragmentation, pockets of valuable areas that are divided by homes, roads, manicured gardens and paved areas that remove wildlife. So, the positive is broken up (often by human activities) into lots of little pockets that might not be large or diverse enough to actively support wildlife. This means that wildlife corridors are needed to link up these fragments, to create a network of habitats that organisms can move between, to encourage wildlife. The more wildlife corridors we have, the larger the network of available space for wildlife to use!

Gardens are great wildlife corridors- think of how they are often linked to other gardens in a street, or back on to other urban or countryside habitats. Indeed, wildlife often moves through gardens to get to where it needs to be. In Earley we need to provide as many wildlife corridors through our gardens as possible, as well as creating such corridors on Council land and in other spaces. The Town Council, under the guidance of the Earley Environmental Group, is looking into providing such corridors to enable wildlife to traverse through the area. But nature also needs you. It needs residents to provide corridors in our gardens, perhaps in groups or rows of gardens, looking after wildlife, feeding birds, constructing holes in our fences to accommodate hedgehogs, removing harmful insecticides and pesticides, thinking about the best options for our wildlife living in union with us.

Facilitating Food Chains and Food Webs

Although we may not be keen on wildlife directly eating our plants, gardens can also provide an important habitat for insects that feed on nectar. These insects, such as bees and butterflies, are pollinators. This means that they help plants to grow and reproduce. The more pollinators we have, the more wildflowers we have. The more wildflowers and other native plants we have, the more animals that can eat them. The more of these animals we have, the more predators we can have! And so, they are all connected in the Great Circle of Life.

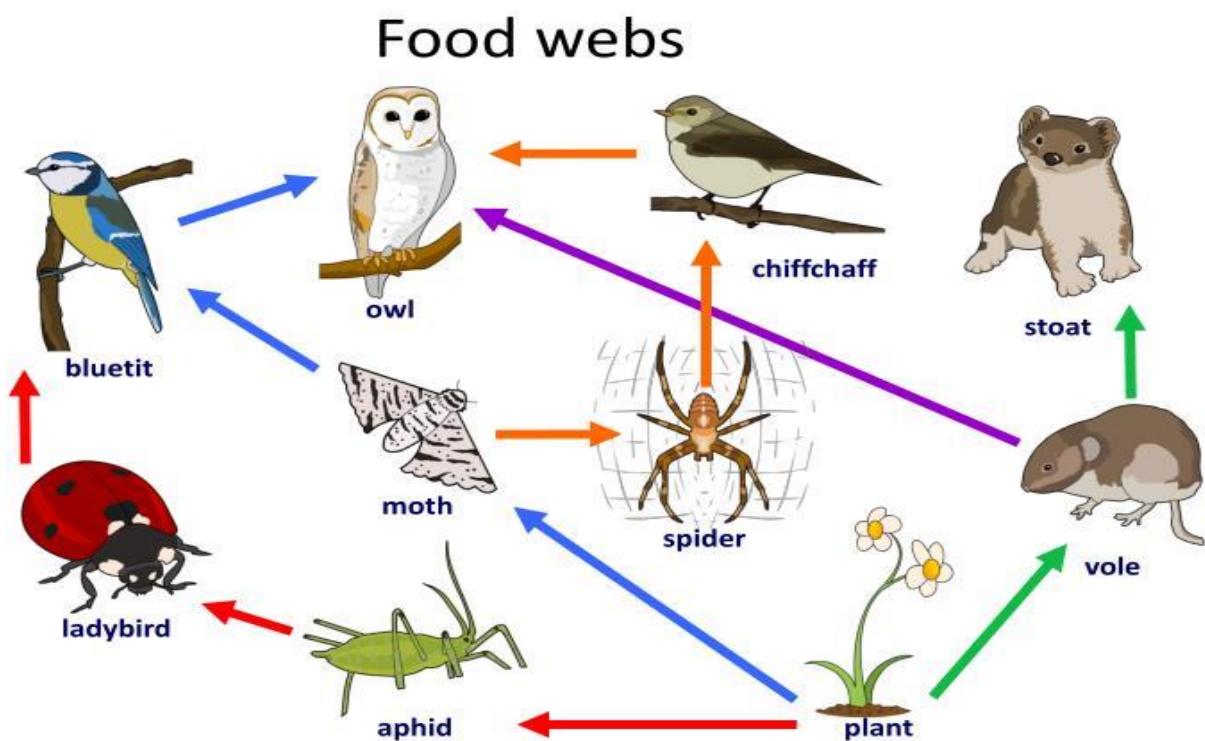


Image Copyright: www.slideserve.com

Gardens are also good for Humans!

Getting outside is proven to be really good for us, assisting our mental health, (<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/nature-and-mental-health/how-nature-benefits-mental-health/>) as well as giving us exercise to help with our physical health (<https://time.com/5539942/green-space-health-wellness/>). Gardens give us an opportunity to interact with nature, this must be a good thing, as again it aids our mental health, often making us slow down, helping us relax, stimulating us with natural wonders, giving us the feel-good factor! We all know that wildlife is fascinating- gardens give us an opportunity to experience nature as well as doing us good.

A home for nature

Making our gardens wildlife friendly doesn't necessarily mean that we have to leave them to grow into wild jungles, in fact that probably would not help much! We need to work with nature to make our gardens as positive as possible, while also enjoying them, perhaps using them to produce food or plants for our use. Every space, whether it's a huge estate, a busy family garden or a pocket square outside your door, can give a home to nature, but often we need to help.

At Great Dixter (<https://www.greatdixter.co.uk/>), a famous house and wonderful garden in East Sussex, conservationists said it would be a waste of time looking for specimens, the gardens were too grand and nature often too disturbed to encourage wildlife. But the Land Manager eventually got the environmental specialists to take a look. He had bothered about wildlife, leaving corners wild in the beautiful gardens and the conservationists found loads of insects, spiders etc, including some very rare specimens and some spiders that had supposedly been reported as vanished from the area! Gardens do matter for wildlife.

There are lots of simple things we can do to help the animals we share a space with, from making sure that they have access to different habitats, to nurturing well-stocked feeding grounds for them. A wildlife friendly garden is possible for everyone to create, whatever space you've got, whether you're maintaining an established garden, or creating a new one altogether.

Here are some key ideas for a great wildlife-friendly garden:

Habitats

Even the smallest of gardens can offer up a huge variety of different habitats for wildlife. There are lots of ways we can introduce, or let nature create, a diverse range of homes for nature in our outdoor spaces. Think about the space you have available and focus on making these microhabitats as good as they can be.

You may not even realise that some of the most common, unassuming garden features can house thriving worlds of wildlife.

- *Leave your mower in the shed, at least during May, longer if you can.*

(<https://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/discover-wild-plants-nature/no-mow-may>)

Long grass is one of the rarest garden habitats yet lawns, particularly areas of un-cut long grass, are an important habitat for all sorts of insects and minibeasts, not to mention a feasting ground for the hungry birds which feed on them. By letting some or all of your lawn grow naturally longer you will make space for many plant and insect species, including butterflies and wildflowers. Mowing the lawn only once every four weeks gives 'short-grass' plants like daisies and white clover a chance to flower in profusion, boosting nectar production tenfold, daisies being a particularly good source of nectar for bees. The ideal is graded cuts of differing length grass in different places. As a minimum, if you can, please follow no cut May. After that you may need

to control your lawn (!), cutting every 4 weeks does let it establish better but leaving a corner with long grass preserves a small habitat, or maybe leave a wide swathe of longer grasses, it all helps. If you want to embrace a wildlife haven, grow a (mini) meadow spread with wildflower seed to encourage a wider range of fascinating plants and bugs. There has been a loss of 97% of wildflower meadow since the 1930's, again every little helps.

- *Borders, filled with flowering plants and shrubs, give nectar rich food to moths, butterflies and bees, as well as providing seeds, berries and cover for birds and small mammals, but only with the right plants.*

Here again we need to ensure we use plants suitable for pollinators. Many double and multiple headed plants do not hold the pollen needed by insects and bees, we must make a concerted decision to care and use plants that are valuable to wildlife.

(<https://www.gardendesign.com/perennials/pollinators.html>,

<https://www.gardenersworld.com/plants/plants-for-bees/>)

- *Trees, and hedges offer roosting and nesting sites for birds and mammals, as well as valuable shelter, cover from the elements and possible predators in addition to providing flowers or berries.*

If you can grow a small tree in your garden this will be valuable to wildlife and will aid carbon uptake. But a faster return is to plant a hedge, encouraging wildlife and again a positive carbon sink. Crispin Truman, Chief Executive of Campaign to Protect Rural England, says we need to increase hedgerow cover by at least 40% by 2050, yet there is nothing about hedges in Government Environmental plans.

<https://www.themiddlesizedgarden.co.uk/which-hedge-is-right-for-my-garden/>

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/plants-for-wildlife/garden-hedges/>

- *Ponds and water features are a vital habitat for a huge variety of animal life.*

From breeding grounds for amphibians and invertebrates to bathing garden birds or other creatures just stopping off for a drink, ponds and water features can bring life to any garden. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=622>

https://www.crocus.co.uk/features/_articles-and-advice/how-to-garden/how-to-make-a-garden-pond/articleid.981/

- *Woodpiles, compost and trimmings*

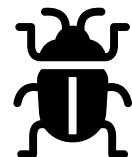
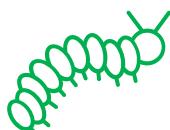
The decomposing and discarded off-cuts from your garden can be incredible places for animals to live, feed and hibernate. They can provide nest sites for wild bees or be a ready-made Bee or Bug hotel.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/nature-on-your-doorstep/garden-activities/bringyourgardentolifewithdeadwood2/>

- *Stone is another useful element in the garden, there are usually some about!*

At one end of the scale, dry stone walls are very valuable offering nooks and crannies for small mammals or reptiles, but rocks and stones simply piled together make a snug hibernaculum for overwintering reptiles and amphibians. Pebbles, flat stones and even gravel are often used by butterflies for basking and by song thrushes for cracking open snail shells on.

Our gardens can be busy worlds of wildlife heaving with nature.



To breed and shelter

A basic need for all wildlife is somewhere safe to breed and shelter. A garden can ensure this in a wide variety of ways to many differing species.

- Growing climbers against walls can provide brilliant shelter, as well as roosting and breeding sites for birds. Ivy is a very useful plant for wildlife, both the flowers and seeds being good sources of food. Plus, it provides year-round cover for birds and insects. Clematis and certain varieties of rose are also excellent climbers for wildlife.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/climbers>

<https://www.thearches.co.uk/fast-growing-climbers/>

- Trees, bushes and hedgerows can also be great havens for the bird world, as well as small mammals like hedgehogs. As a place for cover from predators and a safe spot to build a nest, these can be invaluable.

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/how-manage-hedgerow-wildlife>

<https://insideecology.com/2017/11/28/planting-hedgerows-for-wildlife/>

- Providing bird boxes, bat boxes and hedgehog homes can be a great way of introducing good artificial shelters into nature. Natural roosting and nesting sites can be increasingly hard for animals to find and our gardens give us the chance to give them an ongoing safe alternative. Birds are an important part your garden's ecosystem, creating bird boxes and putting out food will help them thrive. Put your bird box up high in a sheltered area. In spring, provide protein-rich feed, such as fat balls. Seeds are best in the winter. If there are cats nearby place your feeder near a dense bush to provide birds with cover.

[https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/gardeningadvice/bird-and-bat-boxes,](https://www.suffolkwildlifetrust.org/gardeningadvice/bird-and-bat-boxes)

- Butterflies need breeding sites too, growing the right plants can give them a place to breed and lay their eggs. Honesty and hedge garlic can be good for orange tip butterflies and buckthorn bushes are favourites for breeding brimstone butterflies.

<https://www.gardenersworld.com/plants/10-plants-for-butterflies/>

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/how-you-can-help/get-involved/gardening/gardening-for-butterflies>

- Dead wood, trimmings and old foliage can be a valuable hiding place for beetles, insects and minibeasts, as well as fungi and moss. Try to leave piles of rocks, twigs and rotting wood in your garden. These will create shelter for all sorts of important invertebrates, such as beetles and spiders. Or build an insect hotel from dead wood found in the area.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/dead-wood-for-wildlife/>

<https://www.wildlife-gardening.co.uk/Dead%20Wood.htm>

- Leaving areas of grass to grow wild over winter can give all sorts of wildlife a place to hide and breed. If you are looking to cut back overgrown areas, or tidy up borders, wait until early spring, to give any minibeasts sheltering from the cold winter months the chance to move on.



To forage and feed

Another essential feature of a wildlife friendly garden is having a variety of places for the different animal residents to forage and feed. Of course, we can provide food for some of them, such as birds and hedgehogs, but there are lots of ways in which we can help nature provide food too. If we are to create a true wildlife corridor through Earley we need to speak to our neighbours and find out what each other grows. The aim is to complement each other, growing plants to spread available food through the season, together caring about our natural environment.

- A range of plants which flower and seed at varied times throughout the year, will provide food for the animals and insects that are active over different periods.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/gardening-for-wildlife/plants-for-wildlife/>

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/science/conservation-biodiversity/wildlife/encourage-wildlife-to-your-garden>

<https://www.daviddomoney.com/the-10-best-winter-plants-to-attract-and-feed-wild-garden-birds/>

- Berry bushes and fruit trees will give another source of valuable and irresistible seasonal food. As said, Ivy is a great source of autumn nectar for insects and late winter fruit for birds.

<https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2019/03/british-trees-to-plant-in-your-garden/>

- An array of colourful nectar-rich flowers will attract bees, wasps, butterflies and other insects.

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/lifesci/goulsonlab/resources/flowers>

- If you create a garden which is full of minibeasts and insects, you're also providing wealthy feeding ground for insect-eating birds, grub-hungry chicks and minibeast-eating mammals like hedgehogs and bats!

- A source of clean safe water is as important as food, whether it's a larger pond or a small dish. A pond is a real boost for wildlife. It doesn't have to be huge. You can use a buried bucket or trough. If you do want a big pond, make sure there are stones or branches to help wildlife get in and out. Ponds are best filled with unchlorinated rainwater from a water butt. Waterlilies will help prevent it from becoming stagnant. Avoid locating it in full sun or full shade.

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-build-pond>

- One of the best things you can do to help butterflies and moths, is to make sure their caterpillars have the right plants to feed on. A variety of different host plants will attract a more varied range of butterflies and caterpillars.

<https://butterfly-conservation.org/how-you-can-help/get-involved/gardening/gardening-for-butterflies>

- Don't lock out hedgehogs and frogs from your garden. Make sure your fences have some gaps at the bottom. This will allow wildlife to move through from plot-to-plot, so helping link different habitats together.

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/nature-on-your-doorstep/garden-activities/createnaturehighwaysandbyways/>

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-create-hedgehog-hole>

- Learn to relax about weeds (sometimes easier said than done!). Plants such as nettles, daisies and buttercups are important sources of food for many insects, including butterflies and moths. They flower for a long time, whatever the weather, providing food when other sources might be absent.

<https://www.themiddlesizedgarden.co.uk/the-new-approach-garden-weeds-and-why-you-need-it/>

<https://www.hamhigh.co.uk/lifestyle/property/embrace-weeds-wildflowers-and-grasses-for-a-wildlife-friendly-garden-3511336>

Thinking sustainably

Being sustainable and thinking of the environment is another important part of wildlife friendly gardening. So many of our actions have an impact on wildlife which goes beyond our gardens, and it's important for us to think about this when choosing materials and creating our spaces. Peat extraction destroys vital habitats, so avoid using peat and find alternative forms of compost. You can even try producing your own with a compost heap. Making and using your own compost will naturally enrich your soil, while also providing a habitat for worms, woodlice, many insects, as well as frogs and slow worms. To avoid attracting rats, only add raw, not cooked food.

- Give the tap a rest and save rainwater in water-butts and barrels. Pond-life and plants will much prefer natural rainwater.
- Buy FSC accredited garden furniture and charcoal.
- When planting native plants, ensure they are of genuine native stock and not of continental origin that might import unwanted pests. Also, ensure 'wild-flowers' have been cultivated from legally collected seed and not dug-up from the wild.
- Recycle wherever possible. Use reclaimed, old materials when building raised borders and other garden structures. Old pallets and scaffold planks can make great materials for building.
- Avoid using pesticides or insecticides, try to use non-toxic, non-chemical alternatives.

Start with small steps, we are all constrained by time, energy and finance, but if we all keep expanding our wildlife friendly gardens in Earley we can become a valuable wildlife resource. If there are things you don't feel able to do, that's ok, but try to put some wildlife friendly ideas into operation, it will be as beneficial for you as it is for our wildlife.

Let's make Earley a true wildlife hot spot!

David Hare

Earley resident and Earley Town Councillor

