

February News - Wildlife Friendly Gardening

What does a Wildlife Friendly Garden look like?

What does a Nature Friendly Garden look like?

It doesn't have to be the whole garden that's left "to go wild" (a common misconception).

We are celebrating gardens that help nature out and increase local biodiversity. It could be that you have a wildlife friendly pond – one that's sunken and accessible to amphibians and safe for hedgehogs to drink from – or that you have a mini meadow area or native, insect friendly plants in your borders. You might have an excellent log pile or an undisturbed area for hibernating animals or lots of water dishes out for creatures to drink from, not forgetting hedgehog highway gaps! And of course, never using chemicals toxic to wildlife such as insecticides, herbicides, or pesticides! There are lots of ways to either make your whole garden, or a part of it, great for our local wildlife. Check out Wild Oxfordshire's Resource Library (www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/guidance/helping-nature-on-your-patch) for more tips.

A selection of Garden jobs to help Wildlife this February

Nest Boxes

It's soon to be National Nest Box Week (14th to the 21st Feb)! This is to help remind us of the importance of nest boxes in our gardens. With Spring around the corner, now is the time to clean out your nest boxes or put-up new ones ready for this year's inhabitants.

Cleaning out a nestbox with boiling water to kill off parasites and other nasties to make it nice and safe and clean for the next resident. You can use boiling water alone or add eco soap e.g. brands like Ecover. Make sure you leave it to dry out completely after washing to protect the box from mould and rot.

Consider putting up a swift box. Find out more via the Cherwell Swift Project.

<http://www.cherwell-swifts.org/>



Feeding the birds



Put out bird food with high fat content to give extra energy when food is hard to come by. Suet treats like fat balls are ideal.

Making your own fat balls

You can create your own fat blocks by melting suet into moulds such as coconut shells or logs with holes drilled in. Try out different recipes to entice a range of birds; Gardener's World suggest peanut cakes for starlings, insect cakes for tits and berry cakes for finches. You can even put out finely chopped bacon rind and grated cheese for small birds such as wrens, but not if you are concerned about the presence of rats. And remember, whilst fat is important, do also provide a seed mix or nuts to give your birds a balanced diet.

It's still cold!

On freezing days, break the ice on bird baths and water bowls. Refresh the water supply weekly.

Leave piles of leaves and logs undisturbed. In mild weather, it can be tempting to get going in the garden but avoid the urge to tidy away leaf and log piles just yet. This is so hedgehogs and other creatures can enjoy their dormancy.

Leave healthy herbaceous and hollow-stemmed plants unpruned until early spring. These can provide homes for overwintering insects.

Avoid turning the compost heap until April, even if conditions are mild. Frogs, small mammals, and insects may be hibernating, and any disturbance could harm them.

Check bonfires before they are lit for sheltering and hibernating animals, such as hedgehogs, toads, frogs, and newts.

Bring on the Springtime!

Have plants in your garden that offer winter/early spring nectar – e.g. mahonia, ivy, willow, hellebores, crocuses and snowdrops to provide a boost for our pollinators after the dormant months.

Hedgehog Street

Make your garden connected by putting in a hedgehog gap (13cm X13cm) ready for when our hedgehogs wake up in Spring. Check out how Kirtlington have helped out our wandering hedgehogs. <https://kirtlingtonvillage.co.uk/kirtlington-hedgehog-street>



Photo: The hedgehog steps – linking two of the gardens in Kirtlington to allow the hedgehogs a safe foraging route.

Why wildlife friendly gardening practices should be celebrated – fighting the biodiversity crisis from your garden:

All our wildlife gardening efforts should be celebrated – big and small! In these challenging times for nature, our gardens are becoming the last place of refuge for many of our endangered species – even hedgehog populations are stabilising in urban areas, thanks to gardens. There's no doubt about it, big or small, your garden can be a refuge for wildlife.

For too long wildlife gardens have been criticised for not conforming to our cultural ideals of what a garden should look like. Ponds were supposed to have big carp in them, lawns to be kept very short and without flowers, flower beds to have many non-native, showy species, and whilst all of this can look beautiful, it makes life for our wildlife very challenging indeed. Our solitary bees for instance, such as our bumble bees, like flowers that don't have complex structures hiding the nectar source because it prevents them from drinking from them. Fish in ponds prevent amphibians from being able to call it home and water invertebrates get eaten, including baby dragonflies. And whilst short lawns are great for some things, like for blackbirds to dig for worms, varied grass lengths provide foraging grounds and refuge for a whole host of different species from butterflies to beetles, hedgehogs to newts.



However, change is afoot! In recent years many of us have been gardening in ways that help-out our local wildlife. And it's everywhere! A wildlife-friendly garden won at the Chelsea flower show and the RHS have nature-friendly gardens that are showcased. Even Gardeners World have tips on helping wildlife. We're all fighting the biodiversity crisis together, one garden at a time. So, if you're gardening with wildlife in mind, a huge thank you!

if you haven't started on your nature-friendly gardening journey yet, why not get involved? It doesn't mean leaving the whole garden to 'go-wild' – after all, variety is key in a nature-friendly garden. It could be one small thing you do or don't do that makes a difference, like putting out water dishes or not using herbicides and pesticides. Such simple actions in our gardens can offer a lifeline to even the most endangered species, not to mention that it's also great for us to have wildlife in our garden! Happy gardening everyone. Together for nature – always.

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<https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/>